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Queer Arab(ic) Literature and Its Translational Processes: The Twenty-First-Century Queer Novel by Female and Male Arab Authors

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For Maria Zaidi, my mother and raison d'être

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Mohamed, a man whose generosity, encouragement, and tenderness have been ceaseless since the day I was born.

I also dedicate this work to my sister, Fatima Zahra; my brother, Mustafa; my brother-in-law, Kamal; and my dear nephews, Mohamed and Ziyad.

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Zahra, may her soul rest in peace.

This dedication extends to my primary school teachers, who instilled in me all human values, shaping me into the person I am today.

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"We have been committed since our accession to the throne to improving the position of women, opening them broader horizons, and granting them the recognition they rightfully deserve."

His Royal Majesty King Mohammed VI, the King of Morocco

Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to share my Ph.D. research with you. This thesis represents years of dedication and hard work, and I am excited to contribute my findings to the academic community. I hope that the research presented here will inspire further exploration and discussion in the field. Your time and attention to this work are truly appreciated.

In this dissertation, I use the adjectives "Arab" to describe all that is related to the Arab people, culture, or the Arab world; "Arabic" to refer to the texts or terms written in Arabic language; "Arab(ic)" to denote the writing or literature produced by authors from Arab countries, encompassing works in Arabic as well as in French or English; and "Arabian" to refer to the geographical, cultural, or historical attributes of the Arabian Peninsula.

I also use the adjective "Arab-Muslim" to indicate a connection to both the Arab cultural and ethnic identity as well as the Islamic faith. It is often used to refer to individuals, communities, or cultural practices that are influenced by both Arab culture and Islam.

All Qur'anic verses mentioned in this dissertation are sourced from the official online English translation of the Qur'an available at www.quran.com.

Some transliterated Arabic terms like *shari'a*, *shadh*, *ulema'*, etc., do not always have the same spellings.

All the information about Egyptian prisons mentioned in the chapter "*In the Spider's Room*: Powers of Oppression and Resistance" have been compiled from an interview I conducted with Egyptian-Palestinian political activist Ramy Shaath in Paris on 20 May 2022.

Contents

I.   Introduction

The term 'queer' serves to destabilize assumptions about sex and sexuality. In theory, queerness is perpetually at odds with the norm, that is dominant heterosexuality. Queer theory resists the normalization of sexuality and bodies, and is related to a sexual or gender identity that does not conform to established ideas of heteronormative sexuality and gender. Judith Butler mentions that gender is a cultural construction that provides a series of roles and functions to sexual bodies. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), she exemplifies this idea by stating:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 1999, 10)

Queer literature stems from the concepts of what is now called "gender theory" developed by American feminists in the 1970s. This epistemology has generated political and social changes, new rights, new scenarios, new languages, and new methodologies that analyze gender as a social construction, rather than a biological or natural entity. In fact, the field of queer literature is not homogeneous. However, I can highlight some coexisting characteristics, such as the break with heteronormativity in narrative modes by showing fictional characters who oppose the norms of heterosexual identity. This includes the possibility of inclusion or finding a place within the norm.

Queer literature becomes a place of coexistence for tensions, desires, and pleasures, where characters are not reified or essentialized, and identities are not fixed. A key notion in the writing on queerness is recognition. This challenges the idea of difference based on equality and inclusion, especially in politics, through visibility and recognition strategies. It involves readings of identity, the examination of traditions, and

attempts to move away from the normalization or understanding imposed by heteronormativity. The queer literary corpus is resistant in countries that are recognized as homophobic and, on many occasions, have legislations that penalize homosexuality and transsexuality. In this sense, these countries, among which Arab countries are prominent, are both homophobic and transphobic.

I understand queer Arab literature to comprise works published in Arabic or other languages by Arab writers residing in either Arab or non-Arab societies, whose main theme centers around the queer sexuality of their characters. This literature predominantly features Arab protagonists and presents a subversive element that challenges moral censorship and heterocentrism regarding sexuality. By drawing on Queer theory, the current task is to examine how Arab literature approaches sexuality, particularly in the Arab world which I loosely define as the sum of regions and countries, where Islam is the predominant religion and actors are subject to certain constraints.

Instead of focusing on censoring queer behaviors, this dissertation aims to explore how literature can generate effective discourse on these issues. It specifically focuses on writers from various Arab countries who have written about queer sexuality and homosexuality in Arab society, analyzing the knowledge produced by these discourses and their relationship with reality. One of the significant challenges of Queer Arab literature is to break free from social censorship and make homosexuality visible within texts derived from a socio-political environment that often prohibits discourse on sexuality, particularly queer sexuality.

In the Arab academic environment, the emergence of queer studies necessitates a discussion on the theoretical-methodological perspectives involved in the multiple critical practices that have been developing in Arab academia. Indeed, for several reasons, it is imperative to consider certain cultural, social, and political issues that are essential for

the development of coherent research programs and a priority agenda, which can mobilize and unite researchers from various institutions and diverse backgrounds in activities and projects of mutual interest. It is then crucial to acknowledge the disparity between the status of these studies in Arab academia and their extensive development in the United Kingdom and various European countries and, more significantly, in the United States.

Arab queerness often sparks controversy in the world system of knowledge production and circulation, leading Arab researchers to reconcile their quest for a path that reflects their reality with the necessity to keep abreast of the theoretical trends in other academic milieus, whose logical and chronological evolution eludes them. In other words, Arabs are compelled to engage in intricate theoretical debates that they did not contribute to gradually. This field presents an array of conflicting perspectives, stemming from both queer studies and theory and the myriad criticisms these currents have faced, involving identitarian positions that are often essentialist and intricate to unravel without proper contextualization.

It is worth considering the question of the specificity of the queer situation in the Arab world. Therefore, there is a need for a broad academic and epistemological debate. This dissertation will immerse itself in the literary and linguistic exploration of non-normative sexuality in Arab circles, among both male and female authors. The objective is for this dissertation to be a significant contribution to the broader debate about the location of queerness within Arab culture.

Homosexuality is not a new topic in Arab culture and literature. It has a well-documented, long, and rich history, but its logical development has been occluded by a range of historical, political, and cultural hindrances. This dissertation aims to investigate the complex relationship between Arab literature and homosexuality within the field of literary studies, placing a particular emphasis on the essential social and political

dialogues that emerge between the texts being analyzed and their readers. By exploring this relationship, I seek to shed light on the dynamic interactions and exchanges that occur within the literary realm, where the texts not only reflect but also actively engage with the societal and political contexts in which they are produced and received. Through an examination of several literary works, I will analyze how these texts navigate and negotiate the complexity of homosexuality in Arab culture, considering the ways in which they contribute to shaping the understanding, acceptance, and representation of queer identities and (homo)sexual orientation.

The term "(homo)sexual orientation" refers to an individual's persistent emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to individuals of the same-sex, and how they identify themselves based on these attractions and associated behaviors. Although (homo)sexual orientation is commonly viewed as an individual characteristic, much like biological sex, gender identity, or age, this perspective is limited because sexual orientation is more accurately defined by one's relationships with others. Those who identify as homosexual express their sexual orientation through a set of behaviors with others, such as holding hands or kissing in public. Consequently, sexual orientation is closely linked to intimate personal relationships that satisfy a range of emotional needs, including love, attachment, and intimacy. These connections go beyond sexual activity and include nonsexual physical affection, shared values, goals, mutual support, and ongoing commitment.

There is a debate over the idea of whether sexual orientation is biological or a mere cultural construct. In her book *Sexual Fluidity* (2008), Lisa M. Diamond argues:

> Briefly, essentialists view sexual orientation (and sexuality more generally) as based in internal, intrinsic, biological processes. Social constructionists, in contrast, maintain that sexuality and sexual orientation are culturally constructed, meaning that they are determined by social norms, culture, and systemic political forces. (Diamond 2008, 19)

In the Arab context, the majority of those who identify as homosexual believe that their sexual orientation is innate and that no external factor has intervened in the process of feeling sexual desires for same-sex subjects.

Not embracing heterosexual orientation, the queer Arab community is often marginalized due to the societal and cultural norms that view any sexuality other than that which is deemed acceptable as a threat. As a result, writing, often in a non-Arabic language such as French or English, becomes the only refuge in which queer subjects can feel welcomed without fear of persecution. In essence, writing becomes an exercise in freedom and a fundamental aspect of constructing the selves, identities, and histories of these subjects. It occupies the interval between 'what was made of a subject' and 'what they make of what was made of them.' This interval primarily stems from the subject's homoerotic inclination, which often incurs harsh social backlash as soon as it becomes publicly known. Arab homoeroticism, with its nuances and complexities, further accentuates the challenges entwined within this literary exploration.

Arab homoeroticism is a comprehensive concept that aims to account for the different forms of erotic relationships between individuals of the same sex and gender. It disregards the historical and cultural configurations they take, as well as the personal and social perceptions they generate, and the presence or absence of specific genital, emotional, or identity elements. The concept of Arab homoeroticism is valuable for several reasons. In terms of history and cultural criticism, it does not impose any predetermined model, allowing respect for the configurations of relationships between queer subjects in each specific cultural, social, or personal context. Regarding literary criticism, it is of vital importance for analyzing literary works because it does not impose foreign models or identities on writers or their characters. That the term "homoeroticism" has no literal translation in Arabic and only exists as a concept borrowed from Western

epistemology prevents the arbitrary attribution of identity or a pre-constructed typology to the characters in question.

Arab queer sexuality falls prey to the ostracism perpetrated by Arab culture and society, primarily based on Islam's view of individuals who identify as queer. In this regard, queer individuals continue to oscillate between paradoxical extremes. Arabs who identify as queer find themselves constantly pulled towards one facet of their identity and fall into a confounding mire. This is clearly evident in the cases of the characters that I will explore throughout this dissertation. Given the strong Islamic objection to non-heterosexual practices, which I will discuss in the subsequent chapters, queer individuals can either adhere to religious teachings that forbid their non-normative sexuality and live as heterosexuals, or choose to come out as gay or lesbian and brace themselves for the social stigma and marginalization they will inevitably face.

The hybrid identity of the queer Arab subject does not possess what Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) refers to as a third space. As I will examine, there have been numerous efforts to reconcile Islam and homosexuality, with some Arab scholars asserting that they genuinely follow Islam and embrace their homosexual orientation. However, the characters under close scrutiny do not disassociate Islam from their sexuality. The cultural and psychological obfuscation that these characters exude does not promote a compromise between Islam and homosexuality. As we will come to understand, most of them choose to maintain their search for a fixed homosexual identity. I shall not say that they relegate religion to oblivion, but they believe that they can live a satisfactory, peaceful life being both queer and Muslim.

Debates surrounding Islam and homosexuality are still ongoing, having social and cultural values as other unavoidable aspects of Arab identity. Arabness constitutes both an individual and collective identity that is subject to a plethora of social and cultural laws

which have never been deemed mutable. To be Arab means to embrace the traits that define an Arab individual, and to maintain the inviolable continuity of this transnational identity. Religion, whether Islam or Christianity, has undoubtedly left an indelible impact on the formation of Arab thought and behavior. Therefore, Arab society still continues to categorize all behaviors as either socially acceptable or shameful.

Homosexuality has long been criminalized and stigmatized in Arab society. Therefore, being both Arab and queer creates a nightmarish conflation of irreconcilable identities. In their book *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (2011), Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber state: "To be Arab and queer means many things." (Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber 2011, 271). Although this expression appears to be vague and difficult to fathom, it clearly confirms the intricate predicament faced by the Arab individual who wishes to identify as non-heterosexual, and also of the queer individual who does not want to neglect their Arabness.

In Arab society, homosexuality is not recognized as an independent sexual orientation but is often viewed as a monstrous phenomenon that needs to be eradicated. This viewpoint is connected to the concept of homosexual spectrality, which was first introduced by the Austrian doctor and founder of individual psychology, Alfred Adler, in his 1917 article titled "The Homosexual Problem." This notion of spectrality is discussed by Tyler Bradway in his book *Queer Experimental Literature* (2017), in which he contends:

> Homosexuality horrifies not only because of its spectral persistence but also its capacity to proliferate as a mode of desire, despite the forces of moral judgment. (Bradway 2017, 7)

This applies to Arab society that strongly objects to homosexuality and whose ghostly presence is, for queer Arabs, difficult to exorcise or eradicate. Based on this context, I can clearly assert that Arab society is homohysterical par excellence. Homohysteria is a

term coined by the American sociologist Eric Anderson and refers to men's fear of being homosexualized through the behaviors that a society regard as non-heterosexual. In their article "Between Homohysteria and Inclusivity: Tolerance Towards Sexual Diversity in Sport," Joaquín Piedra, Rafael García-Pérez and Alexander G. Channon define homohysteria as follows:

> [It is] a generalized homophobic culture where diversity is rejected and heteronormative masculinity and femininity are emphasized, particularly as a means of proving one's heterosexuality. (Piedra, García-Pérez and Channon 2017, 3)

Social, cultural, and sexual dilemma serves as a catalyst, igniting a war within the queer individual who struggles to express their sexual orientation while also maintaining their deeply rooted desire to continue to be considered Arab. Nonetheless, the queer Arab subject in my corpus, which epitomizes Arab society from the Maghreb to the Mashreq, becomes convinced that queerness and Arabness are two parallel concepts whose junction is almost impossible. Only at that moment of perplexity does this subject begin constructing their queer identity. In his book *Reading Sexualities* (2009), Donald E. Hall critically engages with the dominant conventions, focal points, and concerns within the realms of queer theory and sexuality studies. He also illuminates the ongoing transformations and contestations in individuals' sexual desires and the foundations of identity. By advocating for an approach that embraces openness and humility towards sexual diversity, Hall posits that we can actively engage in the imperative political endeavor of understanding ourselves by viewing the world from the perspective of others. Hall points out:

> Sexual identity is a narrative we tell ourselves and we tell about ourselves. We choose (…) a set of primary identifiers from a myriad of fleeting and sustained desires that we feel over a lifetime and even the course of an eventful day. (Hall 2009, 1)

The queer community in the Arab world is often referred to as *mujtama' al-meem* (مجتمع الميم) (the 'meem' society). 'Meem' (م) is the Arabic pronunciation of the letter *m* in the Arabic alphabet. The term *mujtama' al-meem* as a consciously crafted nomenclature serves to cover an array of queer identities resonating with the initial 'm,' including *mithli* (مثلي) (homosexual), *mutahawil jinsi* (متحول جنسي) (transgender), *muzdawij al-jins* (مزدوج الجنس) (bisexual), and *mutahayyir* (متحير) or *mutasa'il* (متسائل) (questioning). Yet, beneath the surface lies a subtler disdain as the term *mujtama' al-meem* perpetuates a veiled condescension, underestimating the diversity and complexity of queer individuals by reducing them to a single letter. Despite this linguistic endeavor, the essence of "queer" itself remains untranslatable in Arabic. This indefinable notion stands as a testament to the inexhaustible depth and nuance of the queer experience, eluding its formulation within linguistic confines.

In this dissertation, I will use the terms 'queer' and 'homosexual' non-interchangeably. The term 'queer' encompasses any individual who does not identify as heterosexual and stands outside of the heteronormative realm. It is an umbrella term that refers to all non-heterosexual identities. 'Homosexual' is an accurate term to refer to individuals who are exclusively attracted to people of the same sex and gender. When I use the term 'queer,' I tend to emphasize the nonconformity of their sexuality in a society that does not accept it. On the other hand, when I use the term 'homosexual,' I refer specifically to individuals who identify as gay or lesbian.

It is vital to address the perspectives from which readers can approach this dissertation. Due to strict censorship in Arab countries against non-heteronormative sexuality, some of the novels written in the past do not feature homosexual characters as protagonists. Instead, they may hint at a character's queerness or not focus on their sexual orientation. This issue is particularly relevant when the text is not exclusively centered

around queer sexuality. My corpus consists of six novels in which the protagonists openly embrace their homosexual orientation and explicitly identify as such. We shall explore how to read the representations of homosexual characters and the distinct social and cultural discourses disseminated throughout the novels in a coherent and methodical manner. This exploration will be undertaken with the assumption that the reader is tuned in to the author's perspective and is, therefore, capable of fully grasping the way in which the characters deal with their queerness within an intransigent Arab society.

Abdellah Taïa, who hails from Morocco, and Saleem Haddad, with a Palestinian-Lebanese and Iraqi-German background, are the only authors, whom I am dealing with, who have openly identified as gay. Elham Mansour, from Lebanon; Samar Yazbek, from Syria; Seba Al-Herz, from Saudi Arabia; and Muhammad Abdelnabi, from Egypt have not spoken openly about their sexual orientation. However, their writing on homosexuality in the Arab world is indicative of their support of queerness as a sexuality that should be warmly welcomed by Arabs. In this regard, we must approach this issue as a disjunction: either we base our interpretation on the author's biographical data and read the novel through that lens, or we infer a supposed homosexuality expressed through the textual strategies that they are likely to use. To honor the chronological order and acknowledge the resistance posed by a multitude of authors against Arab culture, my dissertation begins by examining the novels penned by female authors, thereby affirming the existence of Arab female authors in this narrative challenge. Additionally, it highlights that 'coming out' is often the first step the characters in these novels strive to take.

'Coming out' is a very challenging decision that puts the Arab individual at peril. This is because by the time they come out, they have already been automatically marginalized. Harsh criticism is initiated by outside society and then extends to the queer individual's family. For queer Arabs, the act of coming out entails a complex and

multifaceted journey of doubting, affirming, embracing, and appreciating their non-heterosexual orientation. This process involves self-discovery and a social hiatus through which individuals can reveal their queer identity to others, anticipating the vehement reactions they may receive from society.

In the Arab world, the act of coming out presents a slew of challenges. Society exerts significant pressure through established norms and expectations concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, and individuals are often socialized to conform to heteronormative standards and abide by society's prescribed gender roles. Heteronormativity is held in high regard among Arabs, who view it as essential to ensuring the continuity of their offspring. Arab society enforces strict codes of behavior related to sexuality. However, queer Arabs often find themselves excluded from these codes and may feel compelled to remain silent.

In colloquial language, as we will come to understand, the terms used to refer to a homosexual man are all inimical and contemptuous. This is further expounded upon by the indispensable importance Arabs place on masculinity, or more precisely, accepted forms of masculinity. If the term 'gay' is a standard and vernacular English word referring to a male homosexual, terms in vernacular Arab dialects describing him all carry a condescending undertone. In this respect, translation plays a pivotal role in showing that the dialectical Arab terms that refer to a male homosexual do not at all mean the same as the English term 'gay.'

Although Lisa M. Diamond argues in her book *Sexual Fluidity* (2008) that "[a]rguments about whether 'homosexuals' are born versus made do not usually distinguish between women and men, implicitly presuming that the same cause operates for both sexes" (Diamond 2008, 17), for lesbians in Arab circles, the situation is somewhat different, as they are not referred to using any colloquial term. In popular Arab

culture, a lesbian woman is mildly disdained in comparison to the virulent attacks that Arab homosexual men face. This is due to the patriarchal foundations on which Arab society is built; to the fact that lesbians are not seen as a threat to Arab masculinity; and to the absence of penetration in lesbian sexual encounters. For Arabs, vaginal penetration by the man is a sine qua non condition for confirming masculinity. When a male homosexual encounter takes place, it is seen as a violation of Arab masculinity and manhood because masculinity is closely tied to the continuity of social and cultural norms that have long been locking Arab sexuality into a rigid box. There have been innumerable cases of fights and murders resulting from one man harassing another or from a man touching his friend's "ass" as a jest. This is because a man's lenient response to another man deliberately touching his "ass" is a direct abandonment and renunciation of his masculinity, and consequently, results in exclusion from society.

The Arab attitude towards lesbianism is neither threatening nor does it lead to persecution and marginalization. Lesbians are not *appreciated*; yet, the vindictive reaction towards their queer sexuality remains tolerable. This is not indicative of the veneration and respect in which Arab women are held but rather the inferior position they are placed in and the invisible threat they are likely to pose. When there is no violation of the Arab laws of masculinity, the subject in question is not at stake. As long as masculinity is maintained in the way society dictates, any sexuality, if outside of wedlock, is seen as an act of wrongdoing, not an act that stains society and requires an atrocious response.

In the Arab world, homosexuality appears as the strong refusal of heteropatriarchal society, proposing the creation of spaces from which heterosexual values would be extirpated. It is a modern utopia where violence and power would have no place of existence or expansion. In this sense, the questioning of heterosexuality is what leads to the deconstruction of identities. The affirmation of the category "queer" as

a subject is followed by its dissemination, taking into account not only inter-gender differences but also intra-gender ones. Equality, difference, and gender problematize categorization and interrogate the rigid sexual norms of Arab society. Queerness appears then as part of the reflection that questions the category of "gender" in its main foundation.

The corpus of this dissertation is replete with queer characters striving for the assertion of their homosexual identity within Arab society. In this respect, many questions are raised, e.g. how one can designate an identity based on a sexual practice and orientation and how this practice becomes the axis around which the individual is constituted. In fact, if queer sexual practices or preferences construct an individual, this construction is also related to heterosexuality, whose naturalization renders biological aspects unquestionable. However, the range of practices that make up an individual's sexuality has its polarities emphasized according to the importance they receive from the network of meanings in which they are inserted, which Butler refers to as the "matrix of intelligibility" in her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993). This is the case with sex and sexuality, which are often confused and intertwined, and their influence on Arab society depends on the importance they are given. The critique of biological sex as a natural fact and gender as a fundamental category of social analysis has gained importance and entered into the general debate on queer sexuality. This means that, in the realm of desire, the homology between sex and gender tends to break down and contributes to the expansion of multiple sexualities.

In Arabic, "sex" is translated as *jins* (جنس), and "sexuality" as *jinsaniyyah*[1] (جنسانية). While the latter term is used by Arab sexuality scholars and in scientific debates,

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[1] This term was first coined by Muta' Safadi who, in collaboration with Jurj Abi Salih, translated Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* under the Arabic title *Tarikh Al-Jinsaniyyah* (تاريخ الجنسانية). The Arabic

it is still, according to Joseph Massad in his book *Desiring Arabs* (2007), "understood by a few, even among the literati" (Massad 2007, 172). This can be attributed to the lack of encouragement of sexual diversity within Arab society, resulting in many Arabs being unaware of the distinction between "sex" and "sexuality." For them, sex is limited to the heterosexual act of penile-vaginal intercourse, leaving no room for alternative sexual orientations and, therefore, practices to exist.

The lack of Arabs' openness to sex-related concepts makes their existence prone to uncompromising reactions and responses. This is because sex is not only about intercourse; it is deeply rooted in the ancestral foundations of Arab culture, including family lineage, honor, and reputation. These concepts will be further explored in this dissertation. By bringing them to light, one is subverting the norms of sexuality and is thus accused of menacing the Arab race and the features of Arab heterosexual genes. This is why for some Arabs, becoming a non-heterosexual individual amounts to endorsing an identity associated with envy and ugliness, after which the person turns to homosexuality because of the impossibility of having "normal" relationships. This situation is mostly interlaced with stigma and invisibility.

Even though they may appear contradictory, stigma and invisibility jointly lead queer sexuality to what I can label as a "cultural impasse." In all contexts, if a phenomenon is invisible, it cannot be stigmatized because it is not even spotted by society or has a visible existence. Indeed, stigma relates to any idea, deed or an act that is considered unaccepted, and is therefore rejected by the social laws dictating what belongs to the set of that society's accepted manners and practices and what is to be inevitably ruled out.

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version of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was published by Markaz Al-Inmaa' Al-Qawmy in Beirut in 1991.

In the context of queer sexuality, Arab society renders it both invisible and stigmatized, going through a cyclic pattern. It is first invisible due to the hegemony of heteropatriarchal norms that swiftly suppress any sexuality that is considered to be intrusive and in opposition to the accepted social norms of sexuality. When it starts to become visible – through coming out, crossdressing, and adopting behaviors that are culturally associated with the other gender – it becomes stigmatized. This stigma leads to the invisibility of queer sexuality through social marginalization, vehement criticism, and ostracism, which I can call "homoinvisibility." In the introduction to his most recent book, *This Arab Is Queer* (2022), Palestinian/Lebanese-Australian journalist, writer, and editor Elias Jahshan states:

> When the West talks about homophobia in the Arab world or among global diasporic communities, the focus is on how Islam or traditional Arab attitudes are at the root of hostility toward LGBTQ+ Arabs, which is an essentialist and simplistic approach. On the flipside, patriarchal norms are deeply embedded in Arab culture and is an important reason for the rampant discrimination, criminalisation and deep cultural stigma of queer people. (Jahshan 2022, 2)

The evolution of Arab queer visibility must be presented in counterpart to queer subjects' invisibility. Arab society prevents non-heterosexuals from being seen as a part of it, leading to a clear deficit in their visibility. Faced with discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation, Arab queers often prefer to go unnoticed in public space and only express their affection in private. Those who make an exception subvert this equation and challenge Arab social norms by making their sexual identity visible. As soon as society attempts to heteronormalize the sexuality of rebellious queer individuals by exerting power over them, their resistance, subversive practices, and insubordination become evident. These actions are not only limited to community affiliations but are also visible in public space. When their resistance is noticed, their existence cannot be concealed, but their ardent clash with society remains endless, and they are then labeled

as "the Visible Invisible" (Baer 2010, 245), an expression first used by Queer Studies scholar and Cultural Anthropologist Monika Baer.

Arab writers' challenge is to manage to grasp the visibility of this sexuality through their oral and written discourses by thinking about it in its queer dimension, that is to say through the resistance to the identity politics of heteronormativity. Beyond the symbolisms that can be attached to them, Arab(ic) literary productions reflect the effectiveness and materiality of sexual practices, by placing them in a politico-social environment and by highlighting their subversive character. Although the majority of Arabs view queer sexuality as a "perversion" or "deviance" that goes against dominant heterosexual norms, it remains a relevant aspect in the ongoing struggles. This serves as a reminder that some others believe that true coexistence cannot be achieved without the integration of everyone's sexual orientations into democratic discourse.

Homosexuality has long been represented as a deviant sexuality in the Arab world. As a result of this representation, heterosexuality continues to be dominant and requires no justification. The presumption of heterosexuality imposes itself naturally. As a marginalized group, homosexual individuals are victims of symbolic violence exerted on them by members of dominant categories. Indeed, queer Arab individuals tend to adopt the perspective of heterosexuals due to the effect of stigmatization and categorization, which creates a sense of destiny, either real or potential. This can lead them to conform to and embrace the heterosexual framework of perception, feeling restricted and compelled to do so, and to experience shame about their sexuality, which, from the point of view of dominant categories, defines them. They may swing between the fear of being unmasked and the desire to be recognized by society.

Most Arab writers who have portrayed one or more of their protagonists as homosexual are advocating for sexual equality. They advocate for queer individuals to be

treated equally by society and the law, rather than being unfairly categorized based on their sexual orientation. For the defenders of sexual diversity in the Arab world, the challenge is not so much to intellectually campaign for a sexual revolution in the region, but rather to objectify the discourse surrounding sexuality and its politics. If the Arab discourse on sexuality is considered immutable, any attempt to rebel against Arab sexual norms will be a total fiasco because the pillars of sexual hegemony still dictate the monolithic aspect of sexuality and desire.

In his book *Saint Foucault* (1995), David M. Halperin states that "the heterosexual/homosexual binarism is itself a homophobic production, just as the man/woman binarism is a sexist production" (Halperin 1995, 44). This means that "processes of liberation" and "practices of freedom" must be dissociated. The discourse of "sexual freedoms" is not only what is truly advocated for among the queer Arab literati, but also a deeper understanding of sexual pleasure, love relationships, and eroticism. Only by adopting this practical posture, restoring the discourses of writers, is it possible to account for their desired aspirations. Nonetheless, these literary fights for the liberalization of sexuality are strenuous because Arab writers are aware that the 'necessary' and the 'possible' are, culturally and socially, still not met.

In Arab societies, "queer" is perceived as an irrevocably undisputed issue. Even if Arabs find it difficult to literally define "queer" in the absence of a direct translation into Arabic, questions about the translation processes inherent in theoretical expressions do not necessarily imply that "queer" is alien to Arab reality. It is necessary to examine how the term "queer" has evolved to carry a negative connotation that is associated with "bizarre," "strange," "abnormal," and "unnatural." It is worth noting that the adjective "queer" was not initially associated with dissident sexualities, but instead was used to describe unconventional behavior. Only later, in the nominal form, did the term become

associated with homosexuality, specifically homosexual men. As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries progressed, the term "queer" was used more broadly to encompass any sexuality that was deemed *deviant*.

Several intellectuals, including Samar Habib and Sarah Ahmed, have addressed the term "queer" without literally translating it. Responding to it means taking a political position on the fringes and against the contrasting social and cultural practices that confront the heteronormative aspects of sexuality. The term "queer," which falls within the semantic field of insults, offenses, and taboo words, becomes the object of rhetorical and political re-appropriation by the individuals who have been designated by it. Although insults can reduce the person to whom they are addressed to an object, they, in turn, give the insulted person the possibility to react, appropriate the insult, and 'resignify it politically' as a strategy of resistance and subversion. This creates a discursive opportunity for queer individuals to refuse the position of an object and to constitute themselves as subjects who recognize their "interpellation" by the insult. They, thus, refuse to be an object and assume the condition of a historical subject, which allows them to retaliate. The notion of ideological interpellation in the constitution of subjectivity, based on a mechanism of an unconscious character was approached by the French philosopher Louis Althusser in his books *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) and *Positions* (1976), and further extended by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).

When referring to Arab queerness, discourse is marginalized, being outside the bounds set by power in creating the normal vs. abnormal divide. This binary opposition is believed to be one of the very crucial requirements of homosexuality. In *Wild Things* (2020), Jack Judith Halberstam contends:

> Homosexuality indeed depends on, requires, and bolsters this split between the natural and the aesthetic, the normal and the aberrant, the domestic and the wild. (Halberstam, 2020, 17)

Because heteronormativity as the dominant way of ordering and shaping sexuality does not allow for a critical engagement with the bodies that elude normativity and constitute themselves in their own sexual practices, it excludes all elements that try to break its principles. In fact, Arab non-heteronormativity does not impose talking about the supposedly abnormal; it seeks to let other practices speak and interpret the communication of the body that resists and builds identity from a future perspective.

This dissertation aims to highlight the dual criticism evoked by the novels under examination. These novels exhibit a dual struggle. Firstly, they challenge and defy societal norms in conservative nations, subverting social and cultural expectations. Secondly, they encounter Islam as an additional significant factor hindering their existence.

I have been keen to work on this topic as there is not much research on queer literature with a link to Arab culture, Arab socity and Islam. Another reason that prompted me to work on this dissertation is that not only is the topic dismissed by the Muslim and Arab society but also because no supervisor – in Morocco and the Arab world – agreed to supervise it. This evinces the fact that even Arab academic researchers and the intelligentsia refuse to be involved in enlarging the scope within which such a forbidden field of study lies.

The gendered duality of these novels is called into question and proves that homosexuality should not be considered as a sexual expression inferior to heterosexuality but rather as an independent and complete entity in itself. The power of the novels under scrutiny is their capacity to confront cultural and literary injunctions. I thus attempt to open up a space where it is possible to identify homosexuality in its entirety. Instead of

perpetuating the binary visions of identities and sexualities, the novels in my corpus open up a dialectic which emphasizes the need for deeper reading.

In this dissertation, I am working on six novels interrogating queer figures, with a balanced divide of their authors' gender. I have chosen three novels written by female Arab writers – tackling lesbianism – and three novels written by men – putting male homosexual characters in the limelight in their plots. The novels I am going to examine are Elham Mansour's *I Am You* (2000), Seba Al-Herz's *The Others* (2009), and Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2012). The second half of the corpus concerns Abdellah Taia's *An Arab Melancholia* (2008), Saleem Haddad's *Guapa* (2016) and Muhammad Abdelnabi's *In the Spider's Room* (2017). Using these primary sources (some of which are translations from Arabic and French to English), I aim to provide a comprehensive reading of queer novels written by Arab writers by contextualizing the way in which otherness manifests and elucidating the extent to which this type of literature dismantles cultural and social discourses of gender as it conventionally construes sexual identity within the text. What all these novels have in common is the portrayal of homosexuality within Arab society. They all have queer protagonists who grapple with society in distinct ways. By this, I mean that the protagonists take different paths in their search for a queer identity, each devising their own plans, strategies, and methods through which they can challenge the social norms that constrain their sexual orientation.

The representation of homosexual characters within my corpus is paradoxical in nature, owing to its multifaceted portrayal of diverse stories in varying temporal and spatial contexts, whilst simultaneously possessing a one-dimensional quality in its depiction of these characters as actively resisting heteronormative norms pertaining to Arab sexuality. My analysis reveals instances wherein the protagonists self-identify as homosexual and genuinely embody such sexual orientations, alongside cases wherein

they subvert heterosexual norms through their involvement in homosexuality. Further, I observe that within several social contexts, the depiction of Arab homosexuals as heterosexual is commonplace, reflecting their inability to endure the societal marginalization associated with their sexual orientations, resulting in their assumption of a "straight" identity as a means of conforming to the established norms. In contrast, within a considerable portion of my analyzed literature, the protagonists identify as queer from a young age, and subsequently confront ongoing struggles throughout the narrative in their efforts to construct their homosexual identity.

How is homosexual identity constructed and translated, and how is it socially managed? These are the fundamental questions that underpin this dissertation, and upon which my analysis is largely based. The current context in which the construction of homosexual identities is unfolding is highly complex and confusing, especially within Arab society where multiple, profoundly different representations of homosexuality coexist. If we were to place these representations on a continuum, we would at one end find that the portrayal of homosexuality as a form of sexuality that the authors show is subject to standardization and regulation, while at the opposite end of the spectrum, we would witness that homosexuality is viewed as a deviant form of sexuality. The first context is indicative of the normalization process of homosexuality, which emphasizes its standardization, regulation and acceptance within Arab society. The second context is rooted in the principle of heteronormativity, which promotes heterosexuality as the fixed model of reference for sexual behavior.

How to deal with the spirit of openness and the normative pressure of heterosexuality? Answering this question leads to the conceptualization of an identity model capable of restoring the process of constructing homosexual identity, which is the subject of this dissertation. The goal is then to consider the constituent aspects of the

constructed identity model and the corresponding strategies devised to address them. Through this approach upon which this dissertation is based, my reflections lead me to believe that queer identities are multiple. Each individual has several identities, whether successively or simultaneously. Each individual possesses a multitude of identities that contribute to the formation of their overall identity and social position. Consequently, no one is exclusively "queer." The diverse identities comprising the homosexual identity take shape within the historical, social, and cultural context of an individual's interactions, as I will exemplify in the following sub-sections of this dissertation.

This dissertation introduces a new component of the character's identity that is central to the construction of homosexual identity, known as the felt identity. This addition is necessary because some individuals, at some point in their journey, may experience their homosexuality through physical and emotional attraction towards individuals of the same sex. There is also a split in identity, with one identity for oneself and another identity for others. This division is legitimized by the fact that an individual cannot display their homosexuality in front of other people, especially when they are heterosexuals. This individual only agrees to identify as homosexual with the homosexual individuals around them.

The homosexual identity that Arab individuals attempt to assert is based on a model that structures identity into subjective and objective layers. To better understand this construction process, it is important to introduce a distinction between what the individual constructs of their own identity and what they build from the identity drawn from society. What is felt, desired, and committed to by the homosexual individual represents the subjective level of their identity, while the objective level consists of the expected and assigned one. To enhance their subjective identity, Arab homosexuals must first circumvent, then overlook, and finally eradicate their objective identity. This process

requires a myriad of identity strategies to successfully construct their homosexual identity.

'Identity strategies' refer to the actions taken to achieve one or more goals and oriented according to the interaction and context in which they occur. Thus conceived, identity strategies do not remain identical in time or space because they depend on the social, historical, cultural, and psychological context in which the interaction takes place. Although conceptualized and implemented to manage identity tensions between different components of identity, it is important to specify that identity strategies owe their existence to the potentially stigmatizing character of homosexuality.

To understand what this potentially covers, we have to relate to the aforementioned notion of stigma. It is an attribute that discredits the individual who carries it. It can be of two different types: directly visible or latent. In the first case, the individual who carries the stigma is discredited. In the second case, the individual is discredited but forced to live in a situation where the difference is neither immediately apparent nor already known. We have to acknowledge that homosexuality carries a particular stigma as it is associated with both the body and desire, and often remains invisible. Moreover, its social regulation is postponed and open to challenge. In other words, it is a latent stigma that can be concealed in many ways, placing homosexuals within the category of discredited individuals. However, such concealment requires effort. To avoid the stigma and potential victimization resulting from revealing their sexual identity, homosexuals develop and intentionally use 'identity strategies.'

In my corpus, all the characters are depicted as highly astute, with full awareness of the cultural and social parameters that define the discourse of Arab sexuality. Despite being victimized, they succeed in constructing a homosexual identity in an unwelcoming

environment through a socially cunning stratagem. This paves the way for the invisible to become visible and for the subversion of the roles that have long been unshakable.

The novels I shall scrutinize have many commonalities. Yet, the most discernible one is that they all portray queer characters as lone warriors who wield power from an internal impulse, prompting them to renounce their socially must-be-assigned heterosexuality. There is also the presence of external powers desperate to inhibit their homosexuality. They all fight against different aspects of the societies in which they live, but all these aspects belong to one immutable constitution that forbids their sexuality. There is a clear intersection between Arabness, "Muslimness," and queerness, where non-heterosexual Arab individuals are forced to start their rebellion against the social pillars that exclude them and pave the way not necessarily for true reconciliation, but for a non-vindictive attitude towards homosexuality.

With the exception of Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*, the novels examined in this dissertation were originally written either in French or in Arabic, necessitating the use of translated versions. My purpose is to explore the processes of translating queerness, not only in terms of the linguistic rendering of the term "queer," but also with regard to the potential gains and losses associated with adapting queer theory to new cultural and literary contexts outside of the English-speaking world. Specifically, I will focus on the articulation of queer theory in cultural analysis and literary criticism in non-Anglophone settings.

In fact, every translation implies a 'gain,' an 'excess,' and an 'overflow' when compared to the original text. In our case, the English term 'queer' remains the same in French texts, but is untranslated into Arabic. Its non-translation is inherent in the recurring struggle for this so-called deviant sexual orientation to be accepted by Arab societies. Arab authors tend to use transliteration to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, it is used

to demonstrate that certain aspects of Arab sexuality cannot be translated due to the strict social and cultural curtailments faced by Arabs, which underscores the oppression of queer individuals within Arab society. Secondly, it is meant to emphasize certain aspects of Arab cultures and subcultures that the West has not experienced. In this respect, transliteration functions as a developed tool used by Arab authors writing novels about queerness in that it enables them to demonstrate to non-Arab readers how Arab society renders the linguistically and culturally existing and visible invisible.

I will approach this dissertation from a queer theory perspective to critique the ways the novels of this corpus challenge societal norms related to sexuality and gender, exploring themes such as fluidity, sexual identity, and the social construction of sexual orientation. Through this lens, I emphasize the importance of understanding identities as performative and contextual, meaning that they are not inherent but are constructed through social, cultural, and historical contexts. I also examine how power structures, social norms, and language influence the way individuals perceive and express their sexuality. My analysis focuses on subversion, resistance, and the destabilization of established norms related to sexuality and gender to reveal hidden or marginalized narratives, challenge heteronormative assumptions, and highlight the complexity and diversity of human experiences.

This dissertation is structured into six chapters, each consisting of three sections. The reason behind this tripartite division is that each novel explores a wide range of themes that are interconnected with the queer sexuality of the protagonists. These themes directly or indirectly influence the main character's narrative of their sexuality. Therefore, in every chapter, the first section provides a comprehensive overview and introduction to the analysis of the entire literary work. The second section guides the reader through the

peripheral aspects of the novel's central concern. Finally, the third section exclusively delves into the author's intention of highlighting queer sexuality.

In this dissertation, the examination of literature adheres to the chronological sequence of the novels' publication dates. Furthermore, it endeavors to offer a comprehensive perspective on various Arab countries, highlighting both their shared characteristics and distinctive cultural differences. From Lebanon to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco, and Egypt, I will illustrate that the Arab world functions as a dynamic container where taboo subjects are often viewed similarly from an external standpoint. However, each country responds with a cultural and social backlash unique to its own context, aiming to challenge and criticize these issues. This dissertation, then, purports to queer literature and to literalize queerness.

II.   State-of-the-Art Survey

In Arabic literary production, homosexuality has been one of the least explored. However, a deep study of Arabic literature reveals that the theme has not been entirely excluded since medieval poetry and contemporary literature have directly depicted queer characters who are not embraced within the heteronormative scope. The study of literary representations of the homosexual subject in Arab literature is a fundamental factor in understanding the configuration procedures of queer identity within the general framework of Arab societies. Literature, for this reason, provides a space conducive to the revelation of the secret transgressions of sexual difference. Arab(ic) writing examines the intersection between the individual experience of homosexuality and the societies that seek to impose heteronormative norms, actively suppressing sexual preferences that defy the dominant powers and societal notions of acceptable morality.

The literary representation of homosexuality is on the rise, leading to frequent controversies. Consequently, it is understandable that Arab society approaches this subject with caution. The lack of interest can be attributed to the challenge of reconciling Anglo-Saxon critical assumptions with the unique cultural aspects of Arab society, particularly in relation to the longstanding traditions of thought surrounding sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in specific.

Critics argue that the lack of representation of homosexuals in literature is due to the dominant ideology of heteronormative culture, which subjugates them through a web of social, political, and economic institutions. The end of such an ideology would not only bring liberation to homosexuals but also to any other form of sexual dissidence. Throughout the history of the Arab world, several novels dealing with homosexuality were banned, and readers could only access them long after their publication.

Both Western and Arab critics interested in this field have continuously attempted to provide readers with thorough analysis and concrete viewpoints. The publications of books, novels and articles in French and English have allowed Western readers to immerse themselves in queer Arab(ic) literature, as an urgent and polemical area of research. Therefore, criticism of queer Arab(ic) novels has been instrumental in discouraging any attempt to discuss them within academic, cultural, and sociological contexts.

Since this dissertation deals with "translational processes", it should be noted that the terms "homosexual" and "queer" are not synonymous. In their book *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality*, Joe Dallas and Nancy Heche write that "*homosexual* is a word first coined in 1869 by German author Karl-Maria Kertbeny, also called Karl-Maria Benkert, in reference to men who were sexually attracted to other men" (Dallas and Heche 2010, 100). The German "homosexuelle" was then used in its adjectival form. Currently, when we use the term "homosexual," we refer to a person's sexual desire towards people of the same sex, regardless of their gender. In turn, the term "queer" refers to anything that falls outside the socially and culturally normative scope of sexuality. While the homosexual subject can be categorized as queer, a queer subject may not necessarily be homosexual. Yet, both are conceptualized within 'queer theory.' In their book *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, Cheryl Wilson and Maria Frawley write: "The term 'queer theory' was first coined by Teresa De Lauretis in 1990. Feminist scholars had long focused on signs of resistance to compulsory heterosexuality[2]" (Wilson and Frawley 2021, 342). Wilson and Frawley further expand on their terminological

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[2] "Compulsory Heterosexuality," often shortened to "comphet," refers to the concept presented by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." It describes how societal norms and structures enforce heterosexuality as the expected and dominant sexual orientation, often overlooking or suppressing other possibilities, including lesbian existence. It critiques the idea that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced, rather than being a natural or freely chosen orientation.

discussion by referring to the definition given by American feminist Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick (1950-2009):

> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Queer and Now' suggested that the
> word 'queer' could transcend identity categories like lesbian and
> gay ['lesbian' refers to the homosexual female and 'gay' to the
> homosexual male], without displacing same-sex sexual
> expression … from the term's definitional center. Rather,
> Sedgwick adds in a much quoted passage, ''queer' can refer to:
> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and
> resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent
> elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made
> (*or can't be made*) to signify monolithicality. (ibid, 342)

Following the definitions given by Sedgwick via Wilson and Frawley, it is important to

note that 'queer' is a collective term for people who do not conform to the norms of

heterosexual identities or fall outside the heterosexual grid. Therefore, it is important to

distinguish between queer and homosexual subjects when describing them.

II.1   Homosexuality and Classical Arabic Writing

In their book *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (1997), J.W. Wright

and Everett K. Rowson provide a meticulous analysis of the representation of

homosexuality in classical Arabic writing. They show that the presence of homosexuality

in Arabic classics has not been properly tackled. Their argument elucidates the fact that

Western criticism has not demonstrated sufficient expertise in addressing homosexuality

issue is due to a perceived lack of qualification among Western writers, or as they put it:

> Male homoeroticism (unfortunately, little survives concerning
> female homoeroticism) is as pervasive in classical Arabic writing
> as it is understudied and misunderstood. While masculine allusion
> and homoerotic imagery have been noted as significant elements
> of classical Arabic literature—most often for polemical purposes
> by Western writers from medieval to modern times—they have
> not received sustained analysis from specialists who have the
> combined philological, linguistic, and cultural knowledge
> necessary to advance real understanding of this topic. (Wright and
> Rowson 1997, xiii)

The quote employs the concept of homoeroticism with a significantly different interpretation than that of homosexuality. Bernadette J. Brooten contends that homoeroticism is "better suited to studying the texts of a culture very different from the contemporary cultures of industrialized nations" (Brooten 1998, 8).

Wright and Rowson also write:

> It is understandable, then, that popular readings of Arabic homoerotic literature are usually misreadings marked by the inability to recognize socio-cultural twists and taboos unknown in Western writing. (Wright and Rowson 1997, 1)

The main idea they raise is that it is not of importance to inquire if classical Arab writers who wrote poems on homosexuality were, indeed, homosexuals. They do not scrutinize the social presence of homosexuality within Arab societies, they are not interested in showing how sexual minorities may have been treated, nor are they insistent on the comparative study of Arab and Western homosexual writing. Indeed, their main goal is to bring together the diverse elements and factors contributing to the creation of such writing. They also link the classical homosexual texts in Arab circles to political, social, cultural, and even military conventions. Their new historicist approach to the poems gives the reader a clear idea about the perception of homosexual literary production in medieval Arab society.

In their take on the position of the West in the discussion of queer Arab writing, Wright and Rowson argue:

> The history of the West's misunderstanding of classical Arabic literature, particularly the use of masculine erotica, is old and complex […] In modern times, analysis of classical Arabic literature has too often been limited to readings of medieval rhetorical works that fail to identify the derivation of motifs and symbols. In the case of homoerotic poetry and prose the texts have largely been ignored. (ibid, 1)

Wright and Rowson propose that Western critics' misinterpretation and misappropriation of Arabic medieval homoerotic poetry served multiple purposes. It was used as a method

to discredit Arab and Muslim society, to incite support for the Crusades in Jerusalem, and to establish dominance over Andalusia and Persia.

In their discussion of Classical Arabic literature dealing with homosexuality, Wright and Rowson emphasize Abu Nuwas's contribution to the thriving of poetry on male homoeroticism. Al-Hasan Ibn-Hani Al-Hamaki, mostly known as Abu Nuwas, (756-814), is a prominent Syrian/Persian poet who wrote extensively on homosexuality, which has made him a central figure in discussions about homosexual writing in classical Arabia. While Wright and Rowson do not explicitly mention Abu Nuwas's sexual preferences, they acknowledge his significant contributions to the history of homosexual writing. They argue that his poetry subverted religious and cultural norms, as he became known for prioritizing earthly pleasures over the heavenly ones promised by God to those who follow His rules:

> The poet's challenge to the community of believers becomes clear. His soul and heart, he claims, love drinking wine and consorting with boys, the pursuit of which is the burden of his life. (ibid, 13)

The personal choices made by Abu Nuwas inspired many other medieval poets, who similarly prioritized the pleasures of earthly life. This resulted in a prolific body of literature on homosexuality and wine, which the writers made use of to create satirical disruption in their society. In this sense, Wright and Rowson's *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* not only seeks to understand the meaning of homosexual texts but also employs critical theories to reveal new dimensions and offer fresh interpretations of classical Arabic poetry and prose.

After Wright and Rowson's book, Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe's *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature* (1997), came to challenge the notion that Islam is inherently hostile towards homosexuality. Murray and Roscoe argue that male and female homosexuality were more accepted and even thrived in Muslim societies

compared to the Christian West. In the chapter entitled "The Symbolism of Male Love in Islamic Mystical Literature," they contend:

> In Arabic the early mystical writers began to adapt to their own purposes genres that had previously had secular content: 'shorter love poems and wine poems especially the art of descriptive poetry (*wasf*).' (ibid, 113)

Murray and Roscoe base their ideas on the studies of the German scholar specializing in Islam and Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), and they argue that "the mystical literature of both Islam and Christianity has used the symbolism of romantic love to represent the love of God" (ibid, 107). For them, poetry was first a means for people to describe their relationship with God:

> Although some Muslim mystics adopt a similar heterosexual symbolism to that of the Worshippers of Love, there is a parallel tradition in which the love of God is represented using the imagery of romantic relationships between two males. (ibid, 107)

Murray and Roscoe's analysis of early Islamic literature begins with the earliest references to romantic love in Arabic writing. They draw a connection between romantic poetry and Sufism, as love is a fundamental component of the relationship between Sufi masters and disciples:

> For Sufism the symbolism of love is particularly important, to the extent that certain Sufis refer to themselves, in their capacity as practitioners of a spiritual method, simply as "lovers." The theme of love continues to be of central significance in Sufi works of the present day. (ibid, 110).

Muslim literature contains a wealth of writings on homosexuality. Building on this, Murray and Roscoe delve deeper into the topic by comparing and contrasting the depictions of male-male love in Arabic and Persian literature. They refer to Mansur Al-Hallaj (d. 922) and Ibn Al-Farid (d. 1235). The former "was one of the most celebrated of all Sufi mystics. According to Schimmel, 'with Al-Hallaj, Sufi history, and in a certain

way, Sufi poetry reached its climax'" (ibid, 113). They also make reference to Persian mystical poets and their focus in their writings on the love of God:

> These particular issues become crucial in the history of Persian mystical poetry, where the number of mystics who were accused of believing that the love of God could be practiced through the contemplation of a *shahid*, or "witness," is greater than in the Arabic tradition. (ibid, 117).

Abdullah Ansari (d. 1090), Ali Al-Hujwiri (d. 1072), Ahmed Al-Ghazali (d. 1126), and Farid Al-Din Attar (d. 1220) are among the earliest and most prominent mystics who wrote love poetry. During their era, controversy arose regarding the suggestion that one could experience the love of God through the love of a mortal beloved, *shahid* (شهيد). This sparked a heated polemic among poets who either supported or opposed the idea. Murray and Roscoe contend that homosexuality has always existed in Arabic and Persian literature, and despite Islamic prohibitions on same-sex relationships, discussions of queerness have been present and intertwined with religious debates in Arab societies.

II.2   Arab Homosexuality in Contemporary Criticism

At the onset of the twenty-first century, Jarrod Hayes's book *Queer Nations* (2000) was published. Hayes begins his study by highlighting how nationalist discourse in Maghrebian histories often neglects marginalized and dissident individuals. The term "sexual dissidence" was developed by social scientists to describe and validate identities, cultural practices, and political movements that do not conform to the social norms imposed by heterosexuality. Hayes is insistent on advocating for a postcolonial nationalism that embraces the marginalized and dissenting voices within national history. He blends queer theory with nationalism arguing that "recently, studies on nationalism have proliferated in cultural and postcolonial studies" (Hayes 2000, 2).

Jarrod Hayes presents an argument regarding the intersection of nationalism and sexuality and writes:

> In literary discourses at least, Algerian as well as Moroccan and Tunisian writers have envisioned defining it [nation] as in inclusive space. In particular, sexuality- especially marginal sexualities, "sexual dissidence," and gender insubordination- plays an important role in articulating national identity in Maghrebian novels in French. (ibid, 1)

Hayes shows that Maghrebian writers make full use of the suppressed aspects of identity and historical remnants to provide a counter-discourse to nationalist narratives. Hence, they work on "queering the nation," which involves shifting marginalized sexualities to the center of cultural discussions, interrogating the dominant narrative, and contesting prevailing social norms and power structures. Hayes also explains the ambivalence surrounding the use of Western terms to describe and discuss cultural phenomena from the Arab world; consequently, he uses the terms "sexual dissidence" and "marginal sexuality" to refer to any sexual orientation that deviates from heteronormativity. He uses these terms in quotation marks to emphasize the subjectivity surrounding their use, especially in literary analysis.

In *Queer Nations*, Hayes points out that Maghrebian literature written in French has been teeming with homosexual characters. His argument is based on the idea that the question of homoeroticism is not new in the Maghreb:

> Rare indeed is the Maghrebian writer who does not deal with male homoeroticism or same-sex sexual behavior in at least one novel, and a number of prominent writers deal with this topic in many works; which does not mean that male homosexuality and homoeroticism are without their own ghosts. Maghrebian literature is a haunted literature, and this "haunting" is an important part of "queering the Nation." (ibid, 18)

Jarrod Hayes is interested in Maghrebian literature because of his fascination with the literary works emerging from the French colonies in North Africa. He focuses on it because of the authors' use of the colonizer's language to refute the traditional Arab notions of shame. In the introduction to the book *Maghrebian Mozaic* (2001), Mildred

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Mortimer sets out to prove that "francophone literature of the three Maghrebian nations[3] entered the realm of francophone literature via the process of colonial conquest" (Mortimer 2001, 1).

For Hayes, Maghrebian literature is of crucial importance. On the one hand, literary works dealing with the theme of non-normative sexuality feature characters who are ostracized because of their sexual orientation. On the other hand, by placing such characters at the center of the literary universe, writers move them away from the margins to the center of the literary space. By focusing on homosexual protagonists, the novels contrast, and even subvert, the social marginalization that these characters face in their everyday social settings. In this way, literature becomes a space for openly expressing homosexuality, contrasting with the everyday world where queer sexuality is marginalized.

Following Hayes, Frédéric Lagrange's article "Male Homosexuality in Arabic Literature" garnered attention from readers worldwide. Lagrange examines the representation of homosexuality in modern Arabic literature, referencing numerous Arab writers, including Lebanese author Hoda Barakat, Moroccan novelist Mohamed Shukri (1935-2003), and Egyptian writers such as Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), Gamal Al-Ghitani (1945-2015), and Sonallah Ibrahim (1937-). Most of Lagrange's analysis focuses on the relationship between homosexuality and Egyptian literature and culture. He emphasizes the disparities between Western and Arab homosexualities and argues that translation plays a significant role in this context.:

> As in all culture-related subjects, words are controversial and much debate has been aroused by the use of the term 'homosexuality' in relation to classical, pre-modern and present

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[3] The Arab Maghreb, often referred to simply as the Maghreb, is a region in North Africa. The term "Maghreb" is derived from Arabic and means "the west" or "the western part." The Arab Maghreb includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania. In the quote, Mortimer mentions only three Maghrebian nations, namely Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, because they are the ones whose second official language is French and whose literature written in French is rich.

> Arab societies. It is probable that the widespread modern Arabic *shudhudh jinsi* (sexual deviation), and more politically correct but still seldom found terms such as *mithliya jinsiyya* (homosexuality) or *junusiyya*[4], coincide with the Western notion of homosexuality. However, these are recent terms and have no equivalent in local dialects, which retain more of a traditional conception of the universe, nor in classical (that is, medieval) Arabic. (Lagrange 2000, 170)

The debate over the terminological dimensions of homosexuality in Arab societies is ongoing. Although some Arabic terms are already included in Arabic dictionaries, there is still disagreement regarding their accuracy and appropriateness. For instance, the term 'lesbianism,' which refers to a female's romantic and/or sexual attraction to other females, is commonly translated into Arabic as *sihaq* (سحاق). The literal meaning of the Arabic term is presented by George Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman: "the term *sihaq* (two surfaces grinding against each other) is used to refer to female homosexuality" (Haggerty and Zimmerman 2003, 404).

When Lagrange refers to recent terms that lack Arabic equivalents, he is likely referring to newly coined terms in the West that have not yet been adopted into Arab culture. On the contrary, terms such as 'bisexual,' 'transgender' and 'asexual' are literally translated into Arabic as *thuna'i al-jins* (ثنائي الجنس), *mutahawil jinsi* (متحول جنسي), and *'adim al-jins* (عديم الجنس) respectively. Bisexuality stands for sexual attraction to both men and women, encompassing both heterosexual and homosexual orientations; "transgender" is a global term that describes individuals whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior deviates from societal expectations of the sex they were assigned at birth; and asexuality is characterized by a lack of sexual attraction or desire for having

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[4] *Junusiyya* (جنوسية), a neologism, was coined by Muhammad 'Umar Nahhas, in *Nahwa namudhaj litafsir aljunusiyya* (نحو نمودج لتفسير الجنوسية), (Roermond: Netherlands Maktab al Arabiyya, 1997). *Junusiyya* is used by Nahhas to speak positively about homosexuality in the Arab context.

sex. The category of 'queer subjects' continues to expand as a result of ongoing developments in global queer activism and rights.

Like Hayes, Lagrange discusses homoeroticism, but here in relation to the classical literature of Arabs:

> Homoeroticism in the classical period is also to be found in works standing at the inner and outer limits of the classical notion of *adab* - for the *adib* (man of education) has the right to write and read about 'lower' subjects (bstil, sukhf) so as to rest his mind from seriousness, but the language used has to be that of adab. The mujun (ribaldry) version of chaste homoeroticism found in poetry was also to be found for instance in the famous treatise on erotology by the Maghriban mineralogist, Ahmad Al-Tifashi (d. 1253). (Lagrange 2000, 173.)

Lagrange also sheds light on the asymmetries distinguishing medieval and modern queer Arab writing by arguing:

> [On the one hand], classical literature expresses the confident view of man unchallenged in his domination over the other sex […] Modern literature, on the other hand, is often an expression of self-doubt, sometimes of self-hatred, and the Arab male's certainty of being at the center of the universe has vanished. (ibid, 174)

In comparison to classical Arabic writing, modern Arab(ic) writing, according to Frédéric Lagrange, embraces three types of allusions to homosexuality. He argues that the homosexual character represents typical aspects of traditional society (ibid, 175). He adds that this character "is depicted as one undergoing a severe *malaise* and loss of self-worth" (ibid, 175), and that *his* "homosexuality is articulated in the traumatic relationhip with the Other" (ibid, 175). Nonetheless, Lagrange neglects Arabic literature featuring female homoeroticism. Although the arena of Arabic writing has historically been dominated by men, the history of the Arab world also includes female writers who have challenged the androcentric culture that monopolizes literary expression. Therefore, it is essential to include female homosexual writing in discussions about queer Arab(ic) literature.

Following Lagrange, Sara Ahmed in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) addresses the idea of otherness related to sexuality in Arab countries that have experienced colonialism. Ahmed examines how phenomenology can be used effectively in queer studies and literature, investigating the implications of sexual orientation and the "orient" in "orientalism" on bodies situated in space and time. As they move through the environment, bodies take shape, guiding themselves towards or away from objects and other individuals. She adopts the postcolonial dimensions of the East/West dichotomy as an incarnation of the self/other and writes:

> The reachability of the other, whether the Orient or other others, does not mean that they become "like me/us." Rather they are brought closer to home, but the action of "bringing" is what sustains the difference: the subject, who is orientated toward the object, is the one who apparently does the work, whose agency is "behind" the action […] The Orient is reachable, after all. It is already on the horizon; it has already been perceived *as* the Orient. The Orient is not only reachable, but "it" has already been reached if "it" is to be available as an object of perception in the first place. (Ahmed 2006, 117)

The idea is also discussed by Hanadi Al-Samman in her article "Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature." In gender and queer studies, the notion of the "closet" was first addressed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick argued that at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a crisis in the way people defined (homo)sexuality. According to her, sexuality is what defines a person. As a result, the problem of determining a homosexual subject must be examined and decoded. Remaining closeted or coming out of the closet, declaring or concealing one's homosexuality, is all part of a specific relation of knowledge between the individual who describes themselves as homosexual and their entourage.

Al-Samman believes that the homosexual Arab individual's contact zone with the other may be "either external (a Western partner) or internal (a partner from the rich Arab Gulf States)" (Al-Samman 2008, 288). Both Lagrange and Al-Samman refer to Gamal Al-Ghitani's short story "This is What Happened to the Youth Who Wanted to Become a Receptionist" (1989), where the protagonist, working as a hotel receptionist, is an Arab youth who is accused of theft just because he turned down his boss's offer to have homosexual intercourse with a Saudi prince who could embroil the Egyptian government into indicting the young receptionist for a crime he had not committed. Both authors agree that colonialist discourse is omnipresent in queer Arab(ic) literature, illustrating the power exerted on the colonized self by the imperially and ideologically colonizing other. Nevertheless, they also argue that the active/passive, dominant/submissive dynamic is reversed in homosexual literary scenes, in which any homosexual relationship is predicated on the passivity of the Western/bourgeois individual and the dominance of males from lower social classes.

The concept of otherness is not the only common idea in their analysis of homosexual Arab literature. Both Lagrange and Al-Samman illuminate the asymmetries that distinguish medieval and modern queer Arab(ic) writing. Al-Samman's argument is supported by her assertion that "in the medieval and premodern era homoerotic male and female practices existed as a complement to heterosexuality and not as a substitute to it" (Al-Samman 2008, 274). Al-Samman continues:

> While "the [modern] subject of homoerotic desire is addressed, it
> is depicted as a substitute to, and a deviation of the heterosexual
> norm, as a symptom of societal and economic degeneration, and
> ultimately as a trope denoting failed national aspirations as well
> as dysfunctional Arab masculinity. (ibid, 277)

I agree with both assumptions, but there is another distinction that omits any potential commonality between medieval and modern queer Arab writing. This distinction pertains

to the representation of the homosexual character *per se*. In almost all modern Arabic novels, the character's homosexuality is often interwoven with psychological, cultural, social, economic, or hierarchical characteristics that revolve around their homosexuality. In the medieval era, writing about homosexuality was based solely upon the ontological love and desire one had towards same-sex partners. Conversely, modern queer Arab(ic) narratives tie homosexuality to internal and/or external circumstances that catalyze it. Contemporary representations of homosexuals envision homoerotic proclivities as the outcome of diverse factors, including rebellion against society and religion, war and political incidents, unsuccessful marriage, childhood abuse, poverty and class hierarchies, or simply personal choice.

The representation of homosexual women in Arabic writing was first tackled by Sahar Amer in her book *Crossing Borders* (2008). Amer, who was born in Egypt and grew up in France, explores the representation of Muslim women in European and American literature. Her research spans the medieval period to the present day and covers topics such as gender and sexuality in Arab and Muslim cultures, cross-cultural relations between Arab-Muslim civilizations and the West, postcolonial identities, and Muslim-minority societies, which are her main areas of study.

In *Crossing Borders*, Sahar Amer examines a vast collection of Arabic homoerotic texts, with a particular focus on their openness to erotic love between women. She sheds light on a previously almost undetected medieval French literary discourse about same-sex desire and sexual behavior by contrasting these Arabic writings with French texts. Amer argues that the Arabic legacy of eroticism unexpectedly infiltrates French literary writings on gender and sexuality, and she demonstrates how gender representation methods used in Arabic literature became models for imitation, dispute, subversion, and censorship in the West. By reevaluating cultural, social, historical, and geographic

contexts not as aspects of disconnection and disunity but as fluid spaces of cultural exchange, adaptation, and collaboration, Amer's study highlights how Western literary depictions of gender are hybrid. She crosses these borders to rescue important Arabic and French literature on alternative sexual practices from obscurity and to give expression to a community that has long been severely repressed.

Amer's pioneering and daring effort seeks to combine two major areas of inquiry: the literary depiction of lesbianism and the impact of Arab culture on medieval French literature. Her work is situated at the intersection of queer theory and postcolonial medievalism. Furthermore, she uncovers previously overlooked hints at lesbianism in Old French literature, arguing that they are indications of Arabic influence on the main genres of romance and epic. In the introductory chapter of her book, Amer foregrounds her discussion by providing the reader with the terminology that was used, and may still be used, to describe female homosexuality. She writes:

> A large array of words and circumlocutions came to be used to describe what women allegedly did: mutual masturbation, pollution, fornication, sodomy, buggery, mutual corruption, coitus, copulation, mutual vice, the defilement or impurity of women by one another. And those who did these terrible things, if called anything at all, were called fricatrices, that is women who rubbed each other, or Tribades, the Greek equivalent for the same action. (Amer 2008, 7)

Amer's work aims to detect and analyze the representation of queer sexuality in medieval French literature. To fully understand the literary techniques employed in the creation of female homoeroticism, her study reexamines the lexicon of sexual desire and activity in Old French literature. Additionally, Amer delves into the Arabic connotations of lesbianism:

> From the existence of the category lesbianism in medieval Arabic writings and from the information gathered about Arabic (literary) lesbian subcultures, we must not rush to equate the

medieval Arabic lslamicate[5] notions of female-female sexuality with contemporary Western notions of lesbianism and sexual identity. The categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, like those of "natural" or "unnatural" sexualities, it must be stressed, are Western concepts and do not have parallels in the medieval Arabic tradition. To begin with, if indeed medieval Arabic sexological writings are obsessed with identifying and defining every variety of sexual practice and thus regularly use the terms *sahq* (lesbianism), *sahiqa* (lesbian), *mutazarrifat* (elegant ladies-lovers); *haba'ib* (beloveds), *liwat* (active male homosexuality), *luti* (active male homosexual), *hulaq* (passive anal intercourse, term used until the ninth century), *ubnah* (passive male homosexuality), *ma'bun* (passive male homosexual), *qatim* (passive male homosexual in Andalusian dialect), *mukhannath* (male effeminate, transvestite, transsexual, hermaphrodite), *tajkhidh* (intercrural intercourse), *bidal mubadala* (taking turn in active and passive homosexuality), as well as *nisa' mutarajjilat* (masculinized women) and *rijal mu'annathin* (feminized men), no medieval Arabic word exists for bisexuality, considered to be the neutral, most common practice, for heterosexuality, or even for sexuality. The contemporary Arabic word *jins*, used today to mean sexuality, did not acquire this connotation until the early twentieth century. Up to that time, *jins* (derived from the Greek genus) denoted type, kind, and ethnolinguistic origin. (ibid, 20)

This excerpt confirms that the term 'bisexuality' had no literal equivalent in Medieval Arabic, leading to the assertion that the term 'transgender' did not either. Furthermore, it should be noted that several terms commonly used in the West, such as 'pansexual' referring to attraction to many genders; 'questioning,' used to describe those who are still exploring their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof; 'cisgender,' identifying with the gender assigned at birth; 'non-binary,' referring to gender identities with feminine and masculine aspects rather than strictly male or female, and often using neutral pronouns; 'agender,' denoting a person who does not identify with a particular gender; and 'two-spirit,' describing a person with both female and male spirits are embraced by the queer Arab community but have no parallel translation in Arabic.

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[5] In contrast to 'Islamic,' the word 'Islamicate' is associated with areas in which Muslims have cultural and economic dominance, but not specifically with Islam as a religion.

The literary sphere of the Arab world still faces questions surrounding the use of such terms. The harsh societal attitudes towards homosexuals and queer individuals prevent them from fully expressing their sexual differences. The lack of space for sexually non-normative individuals to question their preferences, inclinations, or gender identity is a direct result of the ongoing conflict aimed at gay, lesbian, and transgender people.

One year after the publication of her book *Crossing Borders*, Sahar Amer published her article "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women" in 2009. In the article, she compares medieval and modern queer Arabic writing, even though she does not provide a clear distinction between medieval and modern lesbian Arabic texts. In her article, Amer discusses research on female homosexuality:

> In fact, if relatively little research has been conducted on female same-sex desire in medieval Europe, even less has been produced in medieval Arabic literary or Islamicate tradition, and almost no research at all has been done on medieval Arab Islamicate lesbianism. (Amer 2009, 215)

In terms of medieval and modern female queer writing, the main difference lies in the scarcity of female writers who addressed the issue. In medieval times, women were limited to the role of the recipient in such narratives. While, historically, there were lesbian Arab women, the contributions of women who could write about lesbianism have always been obscure. Additionally, research on medieval Arab lesbianism is still incomplete.

In her article, Amer also argues that "Arab lesbians were both named and visible in medieval Arabic literature" (ibid, 221). She focuses on discussing the terminological aspects of the lesbian phenomenon in Arabia:

> One might argue that the Arabic terms for "lesbianism" (*sahq*, *sihaq*, and *sihaqa*) and "lesbian" (*sahiqa*, *sahhaqa*, *musahiqa*) refer primarily to a behavior, an action, rather than an emotional attachment of an identity. The root of these words (*s-h-q*) means "to pound" (as in spices) or "to rub," so that lesbians (*sahiqat*), like the Greek tribades, are literally those who engage in a

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pounding or rubbing behavior or who make love by pounding or
rubbing. (ibid, 216)

Prior to the adoption of the term 'lesbianism' to refer to homosexual women, the term which was used in Europe was 'tribadism.' A tribade used to refer to a woman who had sexual passion for other women, with a connotation of deviancy comparable to that associated with male homosexuality. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Jack Judith Halberstam defines the term and writes:

> The sexual activity of tribadism has commanded far less critical attention than it deserves. "Tribade" is a word of Greek origin meaning a woman who rubs, and it refers to the pleasurable friction of rubbing a clitoris on another person's thigh, pubic bone, hip, buttocks, or any other fleshly surface. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a known tribade would often also be suspected of having an enlarged and possibly hermaphroditic clitoris, and some early sexologists surmised that a hermaphroditic tribade would attempt clitoral penetration of another female. Tribadism, because it seemed to resemble intercourse in either its motion or its simulation of penetrative sex, was often linked to female masculinity and to particularly pernicious (because successful?) forms of sexual perversion. (Halberstam, 1998, 59)

Tribadism is a non-penetrative sexual practice in which a woman stimulates her partner's clitoris by rubbing her own external genitalia against her partner's body, which is known as "grinding." The term "tribadism" is commonly used to describe sexual acts between women, but may also refer to genital rubbing on an object or surface, irrespective of the individual's sexual orientation.[6]

Sahar Amer holds that there is a vast number of written works discussing homosexual love and desire between women in medieval Arabic literature that cannot be refuted. For Amer, the medieval Arab tradition of homoeroticism is particularly significant because it is more progressive than what is usually considered. It reveals a

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[6] David Halperin, following Foucaut, is a pioneer in discussing "tribadism," "Sappho," and "rubster" in his *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990). Halberstam comes Much later in 1998 and uses these concepts to define "female masculinity."

broader knowledge of sexuality than expected in countries with a predominantly Muslim population. Arabic writing has long conspicuously documented female homosexuality, though its existence could not rival male homosexual writing due to the complex make-up of Arab culture.

Iman Al-Ghafari is a staunch advocate for women and lesbians' rights in the Arab world. In her 2012 article "The Lesbian Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic Literature," she analyzes the representation of lesbians in modern Arabic novels. The article presents a counter-discourse to the prevailing rhetoric that characterizes the lesbian figure in Arabic literature. Al-Ghafari does not discuss the presence of lesbians in medieval Arabic literature, as Sahar Amer did, because, in her view, there is no reason to compare two trends in which female characterization in fiction has long been partially dominated by men.

According to Al-Ghafari, "the subject of lesbianism is rarely addressed in contemporary Arabic literature, without inciting prejudice, denial or repetition of some preconceived ideas about the widely used term 'homosexuality'" (Al-Ghafari 2012, 6). She argues that Arab societies are still dominated by the male gaze and have not yet embraced female homosexuality as an independent orientation within the heterosexual power structure. She argues that male bodies are often viewed as a reflection of male agency, whereas issues related to women's bodies are still trivialized and objectified unless they cater to male voyeurism:

> Within the Arab symbolic logic, the female body is produced and re-produced as a heterosexual object for the public gaze. Hence, when Arab authors discussed 'female homosexuality', they did that through what I call "the heterosexual gaze". In other words, they saw all females through eyes and glasses that serve the interests of typical male-oriented structures. […] The lesbian, as represented in such narratives, becomes a woman who might be able to 'surpass the love of men', but cannot surpass the power of their heterosexual gaze. (ibid, 7)

It can be argued that Al-Ghafari's choice of the article's title is a reflection of the fragmented psychosocial connotation of lesbianism in Arab society. The oxymoronic phrase "an absent presence" is a trope through which one can easily decompose the female homosexual character portrayed in Arabic novels that are metonymic for the entire Arab society. Al-Ghafari's analysis is based on Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Musk of the Gazelle* (1996), Nihad Sirees's *States of Passion* (1998), Elham Mansour's *I Am You* (2000), Ammar Abdulhamid's *Menstruation* (2001), Hala El-Badry's *A Certain Woman* (2003), Kolette Al-Khoury's *Days with the Days* (2004), Seba Al-Herz's *The Others* (2006), Salwa Al-Nuaimi's *Evidence of Honey* (2007) and Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2008). She argues that the portrayal of lesbian characters in these novels reflects the societal and cultural challenges faced by women. Out of these novels, I will be re-examining *I Am You*, *Cinnamon* and *The Others*.

For Al-Ghafari, all the lesbian subjects of the novels I am going to focus on revolve around the male presence in the homosexual and homosocial scenery. The male gaze hampers the queer preferences that any Arab woman can cherish because a lesbian is perceived as a woman who perpetuates a sex object that is continuously accessible to other men. Thus, the heteronormative scope of Arab society does not permit women to stand sexually outside of the closet; rather, it instigates them to always return to the heterosexual nature, psychologically or culturally, inherent in them, and this is what this dissertation aims to answer.

In January 2013, Cambridge University Press published Tarik El-Ariss's article "Majnun Strikes Back: Crossings of Madness and Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature." El-Ariss argues that *Majnun* (مجنون) is a term that refers to "an impassioned lover and a mad rebel" (El-Ariss 2013, 293). The term also refers to people who sporadically lose their minds and whose deeds do not match their words. The article

then analyses the association of homosexuality with mad behaviors, making a comparison between the characters in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001) and Hamid Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement* (2002).

El-Ariss stresses the notion of madness because it brings to light a new mode of expression and resistance to culture and society. Accordingly, Al-Ariss writes:

> In both novels, the homosexual and Majnun-like character resists the codification of his sexuality and social behavior, whether in Beirut, London, or Cairo, systematically unsettling the distinction between sane and insane, modern and premodern, and East and West. This embodied resistance ushers in a new configuration of Majnun: a homosexual rebel and impassioned lover, disrupting social norms and exposing structures of violence. (El-Ariss 2013, 295)

El-Ariss views the madness of homosexual characters as a means to challenge and defy the social norms that perceive their nonconformity as both sexual deviance and psychological instability. As a result, they are often stigmatized and oppressed, and then led to express themselves in obsessive and unconventional ways.

Tarik El-Ariss also discusses the junctions between the East and the West in dealing with sexuality. In this regard, he questions both the current critical interpretation of the Arab past as a source of true sexualities concealed by Western cultural models and the understanding of modernity as a cohesive project dictated by colonial domination:

> Only a comparative analysis in between contemporary and classical texts, and Arabic and European cultural contexts, could produce a complex understanding of the development of sexual and gender models in Arabic literature and culture. (ibid, 296)

El-Ariss locates the formation of queer sexualities' rhetoric within a wide system of translation and interpretation that emerges from the comparison between Arab-Islamic heritage and contemporary literary representations and theoretical frameworks. He argues that dialectical engagement with modernity cannot result in a return to traditional forms and social structures, for attempts to restore this tradition as a means of defiance against

Western imperialism are futile, as they aim to revive something that has already been discarded irreversibly.

In "Majnun Strikes Back," Tarik El-Ariss focuses on *Only in London* and *Thieves in Retirement* because they both disprove the idealistic view of tradition as a sign of originality, ethics, and resistance to Western influence and governmental authority. These novels disturb the presentation of modernity as a unified and hegemonic notion that fluidly creates and organizes Arab sexuality. By focusing on the effects of the queer characters in these novels, one can see how their insanity serves as a site of revolt, trespass, and anger, as well as a framework for sexual expression.

The presence of homosexuality in Arab literary production is the main field of study of the French scholar Jean Zaganiaris. Based in Rabat, Zaganiaris has written several essays and academic articles on the social representations of gender and vulnerability in Moroccan literature written in French. He is interested in researching the queer writings of Moroccan authors to attempt to bring to light the points that are causing cultural, social and religious schisms in Morocco. In his 2013 book *Queer Maroc: Sexualités, genres, et (trans) identités dans la littérature marocaine* (*Queer Morocco: Sexualities, Genders, and (Trans) identities in Moroccan literature*), he delves most deeply into sexuality and gender in Moroccan literature, shedding light on four major political issues: the reversal of the relations of domination between men and women; non-normative forms of sexuality; the presence of homosexual desire; and the beauty in bodies.

Zaganiaris believes that homosexuality is widely stigmatized in Arab society because it deviates from God's commands concerning sexual life. He bases his arguments on the works of Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, who wrote in his book *La sexualité en islam* (*Sexuality in Islam*) (1975):

> The understanding of sexuality will therefore not start from the internal demands felt by the individual and by the community. We must start from the will of God as it has been revealed in the sacred Book. And to better understand, it is necessary to refer to the model created by the Messenger of God. We will therefore first try to understand the sacred representation of sexuality.[7] (Bouhdiba 1975, 11-12)

The Islamic sanctity of sexuality has rarely been questioned. This has led the extensive contemporary literature on homosexuality to be viewed as a social and religious challenge to Islam and conservative Arab society. Zaganiaris claims:

> It is on the basis of this Islamocentric culturalism that "sexual deviations" such as homosexuality (*liwat*), sodomy or sexual relations outside marriage are condemned by Islam because they are "revolt against God."[8] (Zaganiaris 2013, 7)

This quote epitomizes the cultural and social status of homosexuality in Arab-Muslim countries. Sacred sexual purity in marriage is prioritized over all other forms of sexuality, leading religious authorities to reject queer culture entirely.

Zaganiaris's perspective on the Arab social and religious attitudes towards minorities includes an examination of the status of women, demonstrating that this cultural approach is also reflected in works about women. Male dominance is explained by the 'Arabness' or 'Islamicness' of individuals. This argument is primarily based on the works of Sahar Amer and, later on, those of Jolanda Guardi. While the claim that homosexuality is a rebellion against God's commands may be somewhat valid, the 'Arabness' and 'Islamicness' of individuals are not the driving forces behind male domination in nearly all aspects of cultural life. Instead, it is the misinterpretation of what

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[7] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "La compréhension de la sexualité ne partira donc pas des exigences internes ressenties par l'individu et par la communauté. Il faut partir de la volonté de Dieu telle qu'elle a été révélée dans le Livre sacré. Et pour mieux comprendre, il faut se référer au modèle réalisé par l'Envoyé de Dieu. Nous tâcherons donc dans un premier temps d'appréhender la représentation sacrée de la sexualité."

[8] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "C'est sur la base de ce culturalisme islamocentrique que les 'déviations sexuelles' telles que l'homosexualité (*liwat*), la sodomie ou les relations sexuelles hors mariage sont condamnées par l'islam parce qu'elles sont 'une révolte contre Dieu'".

it means to be 'Arab,' a cultural problematic that has resulted in the subjugation of women.

Zaganiaris examines the portrayal of female characters in Moroccan novels featuring homosexuality, drawing extensively from representations of women as mothers in the works of Driss Chraïbi (1926-2007), Mamoun Lahbabi, Abdellah Taïa, and Mohamed Leftah (1946-2008); as sexual objects, exemplified by late Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) and Rajae Benchemsi; as sexualized war agents, as portrayed by Stéphanie Gaou and Valérie Morales Attias; and as controllers of the female body as an object of desire, explored by Siham Bouhlal, Rajae Benchemsi, and Siham Benchekroun.

Considering the literary contexts and their socio-cultural connections with homosexuality, it is reasonable to approach literary discourse on homosexuality in Arab countries through the fundamental questions posed by gender and queer studies. Zaganiaris's work aims to validate the effectiveness of discourses on homosexuality in a social world where tradition perpetually reinvents itself and where Islamity, referring to the various relationships people have with Islam, can only be comprehended through the heterogeneity that defines it.

"Male-Male Love in Classical Arabic Poetry" is a chapter by Thomas Bauer in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, published in 2014. Bauer argues that Arabic poetry representing gay love reached the apex of literary prosperity between 800 and 1800 C.E. He asserts that there was an exuberance of epigrams written on male emotional and sexual desire for boys. The Arabs used to write in hyperbolic similes, continuously emphasizing the similarities between the beloved's face and celestial bodies, and he makes clear that the bearded young men were always at the center of the literary depictions. In the introduction to his chapter, Bauer writes:

> The beloved's face is compared to the sun – an object of comparison for beautiful faces that was already in use in the pre-Islamic period. As a sun, it outshines the other celestial bodies – stars and moons – that are other potential objects of comparison for beautiful men and women. But then another phenomenon of the sky comes in, and it is a more original one: the young man's sprouting beard is likened to clouds, which together with the sun, moons, and stars forms what is known in Arabic stylistics as a nice "harmonious choice of images." (Bauer 2014, 107)

Through Bauer's words, one becomes aware that beardless men were not celebrated as much for their desirability as bearded men, confirming the supremacy of physical appearance over other human traits. According to the beauty standards of the time and culture, a man would only be considered sexually alluring if he met the desired standards of attractiveness.

In the Medieval Arab world, starting in the eighth century, the copious number of poems on male-male love was unparalleled as Bauer states that "there is no premodern literature in which homoerotic texts are as central as they are in classical Arabic" (ibid, 108). As in Sahar Amer's *Crossing Borders*, Bauer mentions the poems written by women longing for other women, and refers to their absence from the literary milieu as follows:

> Love between women did leave its trace in literature. Indeed, one of the legendary Arabic couples of myth (like Layla and Majnun) was a female-female pair (Hind bint Nu'man, princess of al-Hira, and Zarqa). Nevertheless, female-female love hardly plays a role in love poetry and the reason for that is simple: while women *did* compose poetry, they were not supposed to *publish* it, and those who did were addressing a male audience. (ibid, 108)

The modern perception of women's presence in all aspects of life and artistic spheres in Arab circles is extrapolated from medieval and possibly pre-medieval times. While there was a consensus that depicting homosexual subjects in poetry was a creative act carried out only by the intelligentsia and the gentry, female representation of female love was an exception to this rule. This representation could only have been accepted by male hegemony if a man had been part of the process of writing and publishing. Therefore,

there must have been several female-female love poems that had not come to light due to the androcentric control over the literary domain.

In their examination of medieval homoerotic Arabic poetry, the afore-mentioned Wright and Rowson highlight the limitations of Western scholars in accessing and analyzing homosexual writings in the Arab world. Thomas Bauer adds that the West has contributed to the stagnation of queer writing in the Arab world by promoting binary concepts of sexuality:

> In those Middle Eastern societies in which men were supposed to find men and women equally attractive and male-male sex relations were a matter of sin and not identity, homophobic attitudes did not exist. It was only the introduction of the Western concept of the homo-hetero binary that made people in the Middle East feel deeply uncomfortable with homoerotic love. (ibid, 121)

In this sense, the decline of queer Arab(ic) writing, which flourished for a thousand years (ibid, 108) is primarily attributed to the Western approach to social and cultural connections with what has become a marginalized sexuality. Only after this influence did Arabs begin to question homosexuality and view it as a challenge to heteronormative sexuality.

In her 2014 article "Female Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature," Jolanda Guardi demonstrates an interest similar to that of Sahar Amer in exploring the portrayal of lesbian characters in Arabic literature, but with a focus on contemporary novels such as Zaynab Hifni's *Appearances* (2006) and Samar Yazbek's *Cinnamon* (2008). Guardi argues that the diverse range of contemporary novels featuring gay or lesbian characters as their primary focus contributes to the social and cultural positioning of queer individuals in Arab society. However, Guardi maintains that the limited representation of homosexual characters solely from a historical perspective, as well as the tendency to provide a homogenized view of homosexuality within Islam, still impede the impact of these novels in academic and literary circles.

Unlike Amer, Guardi questions the representation of lesbians in Arabic novels in relation to the presence of men. She starts her analysis by asking: "are these novels a challenge to heteronormative patriarchy" (Guardi 2014, 20)? She mentions that lesbian Arabic novels cannot succeed independently and uniquely in depicting the love between women without referring to or, at least, hinting at men's presence. In this regard, Guardi states that "all these novels remain within a binary scenario, which does not challenge the roots of the heteronormative norm" (ibid, 20).

Guardi's overarching argument is that female homosexual literature should actively challenge the dominance of heteronormativity and patriarchy, both of which are under male control. She examines novels that employ a binary framework, emphasizing the contrast between heterosexuality and homosexuality to varying degrees. Notably, even though these novels' female protagonists engage in homosexual relationships throughout the narratives, they ultimately revert back to relationships with men.

Like Thomas Bauer, David Ghanim discusses homosexuality in medieval Arab society in his book *The Sexual World of the Arabian Nights* (2018). The chapter titled "Tempting Pederasty" presents a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of queer subjects and the presence of queer love in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern stories. The term "pederasty" historically referred to sexual relationships between an adult man and a young boy, which is a recurring theme in books and studies about medieval Arabia. Ghanim supports the ideas proposed by Wright, Rowson, and Bauer that the Middle Ages in the Arab world saw a flourishing of homosexual writing:

> Homosexual desire and activities were prominent among the political, intellectual, and commercial elites of the Abbasid culture. Homoerotic desire became integrated into the social order and erotic discourse became a crucial aspect of articulating cultural elite identity in medieval Arabic culture. (Ghanim 2018, 138)

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Ghanim suggests that sexual relationships between an older man and a younger man were prevalent in the past and played a central role in reinforcing the power dynamics between individuals engaging in homosexuality and heterosexuality. Nevertheless, Ghanim argues: "While the narrative of *The One Thousand and One Nights* presents and tolerates pederasty, yet it is utterly silent on homosexuality. This is by no means a unique finding" (ibid, 139-140). However, he proves that it was represented in the narrative as a bad deed by showing that "this tolerance is concomitant with a hope for forgiveness of sins by the divine power" (ibid, 140).

Warlock and the Young King of Baghdad, *Hasan the King of Egypt*, *Ala' al-Din Abu l-Shamat*, *Mercury Ali of Cairo* and *Qamar al-Zaman and Budur* are David Ghanim's case studies. Although the author and date of *The One Thousand and One Nights* remain unknown, its lasting impact is still noticeable. Ghanim examines the unmistakable hints at pederasty in each story and concludes that the collection ultimately celebrates heterosexual relationships. Additionally, Ghanim emphasizes the idea that physical beauty was considered the primary and most significant criterion for a boy to be sexually desirable:

> In the Androgynous approach to beauty, physical beauty that is strongly related to pleasure applies to both women and young men. The beauty of the boy is admired and compared to the beauty of women. In a culture where male beauty is a source of appreciation, expressions of admiration and even attraction to male beauty would be so familiar that they would not provoke surprise. (ibid, 141)

In Ghanim's analysis, one can observe the prevalence of queer representations in Arabian narratives. However, it can be inferred that the distinction between pederastic and homosexual writings was based on the age and appearance of the partners involved, with pederastic relationships involving older, bearded men and homosexual relationships involving younger, beardless boys. Abu Nuwas, with whom I started this state-of-the-art

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survey, penned both types of relationships in his poetry. Nevertheless, as Ghanim demonstrates, the writings featuring pederasty dramatized this practice as a reflection of the prevailing culture of the time, but there is no evidence of a story that portrays pederasty as having a happy ending. According to Ghanim:

> The homoerotic game in this story and other similar stories end up with sexual intercourse between a wife and a husband, signaling the final triumph of heterosexuality and its naturalization in gender and sexual relations. It is important to note that the matter-of-fact tolerance of homosexuality that pervades the written text nonetheless occurs within a heterosexual norm. (ibid, 140)

David Ghanim's emphasis on the conclusion of the stories featuring "sexual intercourse between a wife and a husband" reinforces my earlier discussion on the sexual norms of Arab society. The homoerotic relationships in these works do not disappear but are eventually replaced by heterosexual relationships through marriage. This suggests that, in some stories, the portrayal of homosexual and pederastic love was based on emotions and sexual desires rather than being viewed as a rebellion against God and religion, as Abu Nuwas projected. However, the absence of representations of homosexual love between women in most Arabian narratives highlights the patriarchal nature of Arab society since its very beginning.

Despite the considerable number of critics and writers who have explored the topic of homosexuality in Arab(ic) writing, it is still in need of further discussion and debate. In comparison to the novels that focus on Arab culture, society, historical events, and heterosexual romance, those in which homosexual characters take center stage are relatively uncommon. This is why critics highlight these novels and emphasize their importance within both the Arab and international readership.

Many academics have expressed their opinions on queer Arab(ic) literature; however, some hesitate to address it directly due to the perceived contradiction between

homosexuality and the concept of an 'Arab' nation. Critics like Samar Habib in *Arabo-Islamic Texts On Female Homosexuality, 850-1780 A.D* (2009) focus exclusively on the topic because they identify as part of the queer Arab community and have publicly acknowledged their queer identity, while others approach it only from an academic standpoint. Novels and critiques of gay and lesbian identity face significant challenges in Arab circles. Most of these narratives raise ideas that challenge socio-cultural and religious norms, and their attempts to carve out a space for queer literature and affirm its presence in Arab(ic) literature and academia are often hampered.

Queer writing has the potential to challenge rigid Arab norms and offer a platform for taboo issues to be prominently displayed and addressed within the realm of literary production. In a nutshell, critiques of queer writing are crucial providing an opportunity for it to transcend the boundaries imposed upon them and attempt to counter the persistent criticism and opposition they face from society. This opposition can be vehement and persistent.[9]

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[9] In 2019, Mohamed Abdou (also known as Jean Veneuse) defended his Ph.D. thesis under the title *Islam & Queer Muslims Identity & Sexuality in the Contemporary* in Queen's University, Canada. It is an ethnographic project through which Abdou investigates the conditions that inform the geopolitical relationship between Islam and queerness in non-Western societies such as franchise-colonial Egypt and settler-colonial U.S./Canada. It is one of the academic projects that deeply address queerness and its intersection with Arab society and Islam.

III. Multiple Experiences of Lesbianism in Elham Mansour's *Ana Hiya Anti*

Ana Hiya Anti (أنا هي أنت) was originally written in Arabic by Elham Mansour in 2000 and is considered the first Arabic novel that focuses thematically on lesbianism. In her book *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* (2007), Samar Habib argues that "it is into a cultural and social climate similar to 1950s U.S. that *Ana Hiya Anti*, the first Arabic, lesbian-centered novel, entered" (Habib 2007, 87). Elham Mansour, a writer, researcher and philosophy Professor at the Lebanese University in Beirut, is known for her promotion of women's liberation. She has published several novels and philosophical studies. She earned a BA and an MA in philosophy from the Lebanese University, where she was the first to write a dissertation on women's liberation in 1972, and she "was awarded her Doctorate of Philosophy from Sorbonne University where she completed her thesis on 'the concept of liberation in contemporary political thought'" (ibid, 88). "Doctor Mansour was the chair of the Philosophy department at the Lebanese University when *I Am You* was released, and continues to hold that position" (ibid, 88). Further, Mansour has written several feminist novels in Arabic. Her most successful ones are *Hina Kuntu Rajulan* (حين كنت رجلا) (*When I Was a Man*) (2002), *Ayuhuma Huwa?* (أيهما هو؟) (*Which is he?*) (2003), and *Bil Idni Min Sifr Al-Takwin* (بالإذن من سفر التكوين) (*By permission from Genesis*) (2005).

III.1 *Ana Hiya Anti*: The First Lesbian Arabic Literary Work

Ana Hiya Anti was translated into English by Samar Habib in 2008 as *I Am You*. Habib is a scholar who specializes in gender, sexuality and same-sex love among women in the Middle East. She has published a significant number of books and articles on gender

and female homosexuality, including *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* (2007), *Arabo-Islamic Texts On Female Homosexuality, 850 - 1780 A.D* (2009), and *Islam and Homosexuality* (2009). Currently, Habib serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Nebula: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship* and Professor of Gender and Sexuality at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

In *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, Samar Habib argues:

> When *Ana Hiya Anti* was published in Beirut in the year 2000, a rather temperate and calm sea of oblivion dominated, and if not oblivion, then it was the appearance of ultimate consensus on the public front: that homosexuality *is* a disease, that it *is* distasteful, unnatural, sinful and indicative of weakness of the will. A person speaking to the contrary meets staunch opposition, whereas a person supporting the negative beliefs never needs to justify them. (ibid, 87)

As the first Arabic novel to openly tackle female homosexuality, *Ana Hiya Anti* was not banned by Lebanese censorship, but its reception reflected the extent to which people ignored the debate about the homosexual presence in Lebanese society. In her 2020 article "The Construction and Reconstruction of Sexuality in the Arab World," Suhad Tabahi argues:

> Sexuality is a rich and complex phenomenon that has often been ignored in contemporary literature within the Arab world, in particular regards to female sexuality. (Tabahi 2020, 1721)

Neither Habib's nor Tabahi's quotes are related to male sexuality in the Arab world. In androcentric Arab society, male sexuality is fully tolerated so as to maintain male dominance. This is confirmed by Pinar Ilkkaracan in her book *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East* (2008) when she writes:

> Nawal Al-Saadawi, the well-known Egyptian writer argues that the need to protect the male domination and power has brought about a moral duality in the Arab countries regarding relations between men and women, particularly in respect to women's sexuality. (Ilkkaracan 2008: 181)

While scholars like Joseph Massad believe that homosexuality was imported into Eastern societies from the West, Samar Habib emphasizes that the Arab world still struggles to deal with homosexuality as a "queer" notion that does not fit within the realm of heterosexism. Heterosexism, also known as heterocentrism, is a form of discrimination that views heterosexuality as the only acceptable condition for sexual and romantic relationships. Therefore, it includes all attitudes, thoughts, and actions that perpetuate heteronormativity. In their article "Deconstructing Heterosexism: Becoming an LGB Affirmative Heterosexual Couple and Family Therapist," Christi McGeorge and Thomas Stone Carlson define heterosexism as "a systemic process that simultaneously grants privileges to heterosexuals and oppresses LGB persons" (McGeorge and Carlson 2011: 14). When discussing the presence of sexuality in the Arab world, Samar Habib also agrees with Nawal Al-Saadawi's view of the dual Arab perception of sexuality:

> What is accelerating in production in the West is material representing homosexuality without it being reviled. In the Middle East, discussion of sexuality in general has become heavily laden with secrecy and reticence, and depictions of homosexuality necessarily suffer from such rising conservatism. (Habib 2007, 87)

In her translation of *Ana Hiya Anti*, Samar Habib adds the Arabic word *mahdur* (محظور) under the English title *I Am You*. According to *Al-Mu'jam* (المعجم), the recognized Arabic Thesaurus, the word *mahdur* is an adjective referring to all that is forbidden under duress and causes danger.[10] Habib's choice of the word is significant. There are other words used with "prohibition," such as *mamnu'* (ممنوع), meaning 'prohibited' and *marfud* (مرفوض), meaning 'unacceptable'. However, *mahdur* is used when there is no way to discuss or tackle a taboo topic. By putting the word *mahdur* under the novel's English

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[10] For more information about this word, see the online version of the Arabic dictionary at https://www.arabdict.com/ar.

title, Habib seems to suggest that the story deals with what Arabs view as the socially, culturally, and religiously unspeakable.

Ana Hiya Anti is literally translated into English as "I, she, you." *Ana* (أنا), *hiya* (هي) and *anti* (أنت) are the three personal pronouns used in Arabic to refer to females, and which refer to the novel's three main female protagonists. The word *hiya* is generally used in two contexts: the first context in which it is used is when one is talking about a female who is not being referred to at the time of speaking, which translates as 'she;' the second context is when it is used as the present tense of the verb 'to be' referring to any Arabic word that connotes a feminine subject, which translates as 'is.' Samar Habib's second interpretation of the word *hiya* is indicative of her emphasis on portraying the three protagonists as *one* female character rather than three separate females.

Mansour's novel starts amidst the chaos and unrest of the civil war in Lebanon, with two central characters emerging from their concealed refuges. This initial narrative device serves as a powerful metaphor, symbolizing the crucial need to bring the experiences and existence of lesbian individuals into the consciousness of the Arab world. At the time of the novel's publication in 2000, there was no organized entity like Meem, a group formed in 2007 specifically dedicated to representing queer women, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals. Likewise, Helem, a human rights advocacy organization focused on the LGBTQ community in Lebanon, was established in 2004, a few years subsequent to the release of *Ana Hiya Anti*. The assertion that characterizes the novel as a bold and consequential stride towards engendering a more expansive discourse surrounding lesbianism and homosexuality can be deemed as an accurate depiction, bereft of any exaggeration.

The main characters of *Ana Hiya Anti* are Siham, Layal and Meemee, all exceptional women in their ability to understand and analyze their own world. They often

use language imaginatively to express their feelings and emotions, and share structural vocabulary and phrases designed to bring them closer. This exchange is the first step in their attempt to arouse their desire for each other. The three protagonists have quite distinct lives, passions and lusts, each for different reasons, each being in a different position. Siham is the youngest of them. Eventually, she comes to terms with and accepts her homosexual orientation. Layal works as a Professor at a local University and becomes the target of Siham's affections when she takes on the role of her mentor. Meemee is the third character. She is a captivating, young woman who is married with children but no longer enjoys the sexual connection with her husband; she is also preparing to end her sexual relationship with an unnamed widow who lives nearby. Layal, who lives in the same building as Meemee, becomes the object of her desires.

In her discussion of the novel in *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, Samar Habib refers to a number of Arab critics, including Pierre Shalhoob, Qasim Nouri Abood, Yasseen Rafayah and Moody Bitar. According to her, they all criticized the stylistic and aesthetic features of the novel by reporting that "the way [the characters] express their emotions and feelings is littered with superficial and clichéd sentences and words" (ibid, 89), that "the text ignored the 'meaning and the form' of literary writing" (ibid, 89), that "it is true that the subject matter is very daring, but this is not enough. We can't just write it any which way" (ibid, 90), and that the novel is "'poorly written' and the poetry (written by Siham) in it is 'laughable'" (Habib 2007, 90). Habib also refers to the criticism of the novel's depiction of female homosexuality:

> It would seem that the majority of negative reviews rest their cases on two points: the first is that the text is poorly written, the second is that the subject of homosexuality *is* distasteful and unnatural or caused by incidents and thus it is the moral role of the narrative to reveal this. (ibid, 91)

According to Habib's analysis of the novel's reception within Arabic-language

literary circles, numerous critics have raised concerns about its subpar writing quality and use of weak literary techniques. Undoubtedly, the novel exhibits literary weaknesses and flaws, such as stiff and contrived dialogue, as well as the somewhat caricatured portrayal of Mansour's protagonists—lesbians who experience limited character development throughout the narrative. Furthermore, these protagonists are depicted as peculiarly obstinate and fixated on their desires, displaying exaggerated emotions of love and suffering that strain credulity. In fact, Mansour's characters do not consistently evoke the desired empathetic response from readers. Nevertheless, as Habib contends, the merit of this novel lies elsewhere, specifically in its potential for pedagogical value. Habib adamantly refuses to assess the work based on its literary achievements or failures. In fact, Habib's translated edition of the novel includes supplementary notes and exercises aimed at students. Similarly, this evaluation recognizes the novel's achievements, particularly in the context of the contemporary Arab world's dismissal or lack of literary representation of lesbianism.

As the first Arabic novel to focus on lesbians, *Ana Hiya Anti* should have analyzed the characters and the aspects surrounding their homosexual desires more thoroughly and carefully, since the subject had not yet been explored by many Arab novelists. Samar Habib has come to find the main ideas connecting these critiques:

> As is indicated by these reviews, the contemporary popular Arabian epistemology of female homosexuality seems to be based on the following assumptions:
>
> 1. Women *turn* to other women due to the "harshness" of men.
> 2. Women *turn* to other women due to experience of sexual trauma (with men).
> 3. Women *turning* to other women are immoral, deranged, and suffer mental ailments.
> 4. Homosexuality is caused by something whose value is unequal to the value of the presumed causes of heterosexuality.
> 5. The cause of homosexuality is usually an aberration of upbringing. (ibid, 91)

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In *Ana Hiya Anti*, Siham looks for reasons to explain her homosexual desires throughout the novel. She initially claims that her father abused her, but later admits that she made it up partly to find an explanation and partly to win over the affection of her mentor, Layal. Eventually, Siham has to accept that there may be no reasons for her homosexuality, or at least none can be found. Samar Habib argues that this important aspect of the novel is often ignored by the critics who assume that homosexuality must be the result of trauma or other educational errors. However, Habib notes that the novel shows that homosexuality can also exist without these factors:

> Even though *I Am You*'s major character Siham searches for causes of her homosexuality, she finally has to reconcile herself to the fact that these causes are either non-existent or impossible to discern, a point the critics (deliberately?) failed to engage with. It is as though they were unable to grasp the concept of acausality because it was somehow a new approach to an old "problem" which was thought to be clearly understood, not only morally but also psychologically. (ibid, 91)

The reader is first introduced to Siham's life, wherein the omniscient narrator provides an impartial rendition of her experiences. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of Siham's account is relayed through extensive direct quotations in the first person, as she engages in introspection and recollects her past. In her pursuit of understanding and rationalizing her sexual desire for women, she reminisces about the sense of seclusion she encountered when her female peers began labeling her as a tomboy.

Siham's lack of established terminology to comprehend her personal experiences becomes apparent. The absence of a linguistic apparatus to identify her sexual inclinations resulted in considerable distress. To prevent readers from hastily attributing Siham's experiences to Western influences, the narrator, in Mansour's work, clarifies that Siham recognized her same-sex attractions at a young age. This suggests that her homosexuality cannot be simplistically categorized as a mere

political choice or as an outcome solely influenced by exposure to Western queer epistemologies. Rather, it is portrayed as a deep-seated desire that developed and evolved over time. By presenting this perspective, Mansour discourages readers from making stereotypical assumptions that require a causal explanation, although it is acknowledged that ideological frameworks may indeed shape Siham's understanding of her sexuality.

III.2   The Lebanese Civil War and Lesbian Encounters

The stories told in *Ana Hiya Anti* are set in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). This territorial conflict serves to bring the novel's main female characters together outside of the patriarchal gaze. In this sense, paradoxically, women's perspective on war and conflict evolves into a positive attitude in that it enables them to achieve their affective goals. In his one article "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War," Sune Haugbolle explains:

> The Lebanese Civil War was both an internal Lebanese affair and a regional conflict involving a host of regional and international actors. It revolved around some of the issues that dominated regional politics in the Middle East in the latter part of the 20th century, including the Palestine-Israel conflict, Cold War competition, Arab nationalism and political Islam. Conflicts over these issues intersected with longstanding disagreements in the Lebanese political elite, and in parts of the population, over the sectarian division of power, national identity, social justice and Lebanon's strategic alliances. (Haugbolle 2011, 1)

In *Ana Hiya Anti*, Elham Mansour's women see the war as an incentive to assert their sexual identity and discover their true selves beyond the rules imposed by men. In the context of war, these women become warriors, but in the sense that they fight outside the terrain of conflict. They keep their pre-war space, but thereby seek to change all that has long been dictated by male authority.

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Ana Hiya Anti takes up the interfaces between the Lebanese Civil War and the erotic encounters of lesbian women. None of them prefer war to peace, but this war provides an unprecedented opportunity for them to express their sexual desires for each other. While all the inhabitants of Beirut are traumatized and preoccupied with this terrible war, women are influenced by their homosexuality in the sense that they cannot express their desires freely outside of the war context. Elham Mansour aims to highlight the fact that in the absence of men, women's desires are ignited, even though these desires are taboo and cannot be openly expressed.

In *Ana Hiya Anti*, female characters are portrayed as victims of the Civil War, but are paradoxically empowered by feelings of loss, fear, and disaster. In her article "Can Women Benefit from War? Women's Agency in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies," Punam Yadav reports Lori Handarahan's words by stating that "war tends to break down patriarchal structures, and women gain, as an unintended consequence, freedom, responsibility and worth" (Yadav 2021, 449). Elham Mansour contextualizes the war at the beginning of the novel:

> After declaring the cease-fire, the storm of cannons subsided, and the night turned into darkness, filled with caution. People came out of their hiding places, Layal withdrew from among the neighbors who were huddled on the steps of the building, and returned to her house. It was relatively early, so she tried to read a little before she went to sleep, she tried to make sure that the ceasefire would hold. She sat at her desk, took a book and started her work, reading and not understanding well what she read and rereading in vain, for her mind was still under the weight of the terror that she had lived for many hours that afternoon, but she persevered in reading in order to get out of reality, in order for the words to get her into what she had been deprived of by the war and its tragedies. (Mansour 2000, 9)

Despite being a University Professor, Layal is powerless in the face of war. She cannot bear the circumstances she goes through with other Lebanese women. Elham Mansour shows that Layal does not understand why the war is taking place and what exactly is in

store for her country. In her confrontation with the Civil War, she stands out as one of many women whose lack of power and decision-making has left them no understanding of the causes or origins of this war.

Layal's powerlessness is shown in her admitted lack of understanding of what is going on in Lebanon:

> It's true what Meemee said, about how her husband knows [when there are] peaceful periods…. How does he know that and what is his role in the subject? I don't want to know that either, that's not the only issue I don't understand in this war, the important thing is that the situation is calm and I have to take advantage of it. (ibid, 129)

In doing so, Layal proves the role she plays in this war: an invisible, inactive role. Her understanding of what is happening is not clear, but she is aware that Lebanese women are not present in the war arena during the Civil War. Hence, as Samar Habib puts it:

> Symbolically, the war is an affair managed and *understood* by men. Interestingly, Layal is positioned in such a way as to usher in a new generation of Lebanese feminists who are preoccupied with liberating women from prohibitions and constraints, one of which includes the sexual. (Habib 2007, 98)

For Layal, the territorial conflict involving men must be accompanied by a social, cultural and feminist war waged by women. For this reason, she uses the absence of men to pave the way for women to demand the assertion of their identity and agency. The absence of men can be one of the ways a woman can change her status in a society. In *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies* (2021), S.N. Nyeck argues:

> Women in most societies are made conscious of their subordinated status to men from birth, lest they somehow believe themselves equally valuable or find a way to change their status. (Nyeck 2021, 15)

In *Ana Hiya Anti*, Layal is depicted as a feminist who invites Siham and other friends into her home to listen to their stories about (homo)sexuality. As the war intensifies, Layal, Meemee, and other residents of the building seek refuge in the

basement. It is in this sheltered space that Meemee begins to develop romantic feelings

for Layal, who reciprocates her affection but is bewildered by the chaos and uncertainty

of the war. Layal's feminist stance against the impositions of patriarchal society is no

mystery:

> I'm not married because I want to be free. I'm not against men
> at all, but I'm against the commitment that imposes obligations
> and duties. I am all for liberal relationships based on agreement
> and love because these continue so long as they are successful,
> and once they fail, everyone goes their own way without
> ceremonies or demands…. (Mansour 2000, 91)

In patriarchal Arab societies, marriage has historically marginalized women and

relegated them to a socially inferior position. This marginalization has contributed to a

resentful attitude among women towards the social circles they are part of. Layal aims to

challenge the marriage codes that have been entrenched in Lebanese and Arab customs

for centuries. These regulations, which are inherently sexist and patriarchal, create a

divide between men and women. This idea is confirmed by Hawraa Al-Hassan in her

book *Women, Writing and the Iraqi Ba'thist State* (2020) when she refers to Moroccan

sociologist Fatima Mernissi and writes: "According to Fatima Mernissi, marriage

signifies gender conflict rather than unity" (Al-Hassan 2020, 43).

On the other side of the story, Siham's connection to the Civil War is reflected

from the start in all of the flashbacks that animate her homosexual desires toward women.

Mansour begins telling us about Siham by writing in memories of her past:

> At the other end of the capital, Siham did what Layal did: she
> came out of her hiding place, went to her house and entered her
> room, but she did not sleep, her mind was busy planning
> something because she was oppressed and disappointed that she
> could not bear, what would she do? Would she be remain defeated
> and silent? No! This determination not to be oppressed led her to
> reclaim her past, which led her to what she is now. She forgot
> what she wanted to plan and asked, "How did my story with her
> begin?" Did it really start with her? I was eight years old when
> she held my hand and felt that strange feeling sweeping through
> my whole being when I remember her and with her I remember

> the touches of my mother's hand on my back. (Mansour 2000, 9-
> 10)

In this excerpt, Siham reflects on the profound impact her elementary school teacher had on her. As the story progresses, Siham associates her teacher with the longing she feels for the first tender touches of her childhood. Whenever Siham quarrels with her mother or experiences bouts of depression, she revisits this indelible memory:

> When that teacher took me from my hand, I found that she resembled my mother, and since then I have turned into an instrument revolving in her orbit. She enters the classroom, I get out of my grip, I become tight to her, and I contemplate her face without hearing what she says, until when the bell of opportunity rings, I jump from my place and run towards her, I approach her little by little till my body touches hers. I extend my hand for her, she takes it and we go out to the playing hall and I hear her. She says, "come on, my love, to play" (p. 10).

Though still unaware of her lesbian inclinations, Siham could easily see that touching and being around a woman would get her aroused. Linking the teacher with her mother is a phenomenon that has been addressed by several psychologists. In their book *Lesbian Psychologies* (1987), Lee Sahli and Zevy Cavallaro delve into this notion using Chodorow who takes her cue from Freud, saying:

> Nancy Chodorow presents a theory that fundamentally states that girls and boys grow up differently and relate differently because both sexes are mothered by women, a thought earlier introduced in Freud's "Theory of Female Sexuality." Because the child's first intense emotional/libidinal love object is a woman, it is the smell and feel of a woman to which both sexes are primally drawn, and according to Freud, feel the first sexual attraction. (Sahli and Cavallaro 1987, 264)

Siham is the novel's central lesbian character. While Layal's sexuality remains somewhat ambiguous and Meemee's lesbianism is juxtaposed with scenes of her heterosexual relationship with her husband, Siham's desire for women is resolute. During the Civil War, she seeks out Layal's opinion on lesbian poetry, and their encounters at the university and Layal's home awaken Siham's love for Layal.

Following the narrator's concise introduction to Siham's early years, the novel pivots towards her inaugural sexual liaison in Paris with a young girl named Claire, who coincidentally happens to be a fellow student at the school Siham is enrolled in at her mother's behest. It is within the Parisian milieu, while engaged in a relationship with Claire, that Siham is confronted with both liberating and constraining forces. Initially, Siham finds immense happiness and exhilaration in her association with Claire. However, their bond soon becomes tainted when Siham's mother unexpectedly visits her, leading Claire to be infuriated by Siham's proclivity for secrecy and unwavering obedience to her mother's directives. Claire fails to understand why Siham would choose to conceal her sexuality from her mother because "it is precisely her self-denial that gives society power over the individual" (Habib 2007, 102).

Siham's mother calls Claire and angrily berates her, making hurtful accusations about her sexual orientation and its influence on her daughter. Overwhelmed by distress, Claire responds to Siham in a state of anguish:

> Get away from me. You are a barbaric people…. Are you that backwards in Lebanon…. You should either stand up to your mother and defend your rights or get out of my life. Get out of our movement that fights for our rights. (Mansour 2000, 15)

Notably, the human rights discourse serves not only as a means to denigrate and penalize Siham, but Claire's adoption of an Orientalist perspective further precludes any potential considerations that may conceive alternative notions of liberation extending beyond the confines of the "coming out" paradigm, which tends to prioritize individual autonomy above familial, communal, and cultural ties.

Siham finds herself ensnared within a complex predicament where she confronts the vindictive attitudes of her Arab mother, whose condemnation of lesbianism as dirty aligns with an Orientalist perspective that characterizes Arab homosexuality as aberrant. Simultaneously, Claire's reproachful discourse manifests racial undertones, neglecting

the fact that her purported liberation is entangled with a historical backdrop of constructing hierarchical divisions and accentuating cultural disparities. Alienated in France for her perceived excessive Arab identity and insufficient openness to her sexuality, Siham endures further anguish in Lebanon due to her unflinching commitment to embrace her lesbian identity, refusing to conform to anything less than her queer self. It is alleged that female homosexuality appears to be more associated with Western culture than with Lebanese society. For her part, Siham continues to lie to her mother because she is often plagued with guilt and an inner dilemma between her sexuality and her upbringing in the early development of her sexual identity.

The conflict between Siham and Claire also reflects a conflict among feminists. Some of the feminists who oppose sexual revolution believe that women have more important basic needs in a developing society. Others, often from privileged industrialized countries, believe that sexual liberation is crucial for women. When Siham's mother discovers their relationship, she brings Siham back to Lebanon where the civil war is raging at the time, to protect her daughter from the "temptations" of Paris. Apparently, she considers these "temptations" more dangerous than the war.

The novel depicts a series of intimate lesbian encounters set against the backdrop of war-torn Lebanon, serving as a sharp critique of societal prejudices surrounding female sexuality and lifestyles in the Middle East. Layal, a feminist who lives alone and presents a masculine appearance, is mistaken for a lesbian by Siham, who is drawn to her. Despite rejecting Siham's lesbian advances, Layal offers conventional solutions to her problems. Meanwhile, Meemee, a married woman with children, appears respectable on the surface, but in reality engages in secret lesbian affairs while her husband is away, making of his absences as an opportunity to explore her sexuality.

Although Meemee's husband is portrayed as a caring partner rather than the stereotypical domineering Arab man, she is more attracted to women than men. Meemee's husband praises their neighbor, a widow with children, for not remarrying after her husband's death, but is not apprised of the fact that their neighbor takes advantage of her celibacy to satisfy lesbian hankerings with Meemee. In a conversation between women, Meemee says: "Men are stupid, they don't suspect relationships between women; they're always reassured as long as no other man enters the picture" (Mansour 2000, 153). This idea is upheld by Iman Al-Ghafari in her article "Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?," arguing:

> Erotic relations among women are devalued as a temporary substitute for the love of men, and are considered of no real threat to the dominant heterosexual system as long as they remain undercover, or in the closet. (Al-Ghafari 2002-2003, 86)

III.3   Multiple Lesbian Identities in *Ana Hiya Anti*

After the publication of *Ana Hiya Anti*, Elham Mansour suffered from the closed doors of literary criticism and a guarded silence. In the Arabic literary tradition, the existence of lesbian literature by women is not recognized by critics. If there is a lack of literary criticism of this production, I can venture that it is a consequence of the taboo that surrounds homosexual relationships and the censorship that curbs lesbian manifestations in the Arab world. This upholds Dina Georgis's argument, in her article "Thinking Past Pride," that "there are very limited historical and literary sources on nonheterosexualities in the Middle East, particularly among women" (Georgis 2013, 234).

Ana Hiya Anti addresses lesbianism in different forms of representation, from which I could deduce that she is establishing a lesbian category. Talking about female homosexuality is not only about writing practices or the development of definitions but also about observing how a sexual practice changes in different social and cultural

contexts. In order to understand how it is configured in the novel, lesbianism is treated as an identity that has undergone and is undergoing changes depending on the time and space in which it is presented. In her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich states:

> Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the re‑rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived […] without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. (Rich 1980, 27)

Ana Hiya Anti is an example of a literary-feminine resistance process against the heteronormative forms of Arab sexuality that promotes a reappropriation of diversified cultural spaces. Just as the novel is subjected to harsh criticism from patriarchal and heteronormative society, Elham Mansour is also placed in a double space of resistance: writing about lesbian desires to prove that female authors can defy heteronormativity and affirming the autonomy of female authorship.

Before dwelling on the representation of lesbian women in the novel, it is necessary to consider what this existence for which I am seeking representation has to take into account. Lesbian identity should not be reduced to the essentialist perspective that usually arises when one claims an identity because in defining something, limits are set and only one way of being is thus demarcated. It is difficult to establish a monolithic view of lesbian identity, and this difficulty often leads to its denial. Women began to become more visible in history with the advent of first-wave feminism, which defended their positions, both past and present, and asserted women as a category: not necessarily unique or entirely distinct, but fundamental in the fight against the politics of erasure.

It is noted that before questioning the categorization of lesbians, the question of being a woman is brought into play. According to Wittig, "not only is there no natural group "women" (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question "woman," which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth" (Wittig 1997, 1). The assertion of lesbian existence is complicated because it presupposes the naturalness of a binary separation of genders; it is as if one must first assume that the male and female categories are natural. The problem with this binary starting point is that it naturalizes the phenomenon of expressing lesbian oppression, making it seem impossible to change this heteronormative paradigm as it is considered natural.

Prior to a lesbian category, therefore, it would be necessary for women to understand their condition not as natural but as socially constructed in a way that can variously be enabling or oppressive and destructive. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir points that "man/woman" are social constructions. Furthermore, Beauvoir treats lesbianism as existential and a failure of a so-called normal sexuality, using the norm of heterosexuality to explain becoming a lesbian (De Beauvoir 1989, 1).[11]

With the notion that the categories are of a social order and therefore political and not biological, the need for the establishment of a lesbian identity is reinforced. There is no struggle, no organization and above all no visibility if one does not have an identity, as it is necessary to constitute oneself historically as subjects. In this sense, establishing

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[11] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). The book was originally written in French in 1949 and translated into English by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. The main idea of the book is reflected in the much-cited and misunderstood phrase "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" ("On ne naît pas femme: on le devient"). This deserves an explanation as it can be misrepresented. The author is not referring to the fact that everyone can choose to be a woman, not biologically, but that the human being born female is brought up to internalize the role of woman with all the requirements of behavior in society and phenomenal physics, that this entails. It also addresses a very interesting and novel aspect at the time, the construction of women as 'The Other' based on the existence of men. The author explains that in building womanhood out of opposition to manhood, woman is deprived of her autonomy as an existing being and her own identity. That is, to define it by contrast to man. The book demonstrates the existence of androcentrism and how it makes women always be 'The Other', which does not have its own identity from nothing, so to speak, but is defined from the existence of man and in as for this.

and discussing this identity, especially when it comes to lesbianism, means having an awareness of oppression because, as Wittig puts it:

> Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression. (Wittig 1997, 1)

Adrienne Rich's handling of lesbianism is associated with other terms. In her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich claims:

> I have chosen to use the term *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and limiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of women-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. (Rich 1980, 27)

Rich and Wittig agree that "woman" is a political, not a natural, category. This may make logical sense following Wittig's idea that the political and ideological formation that denies women exists to hide women's reality (Wittig 1997, 1). That is, categorization is retained because it serves the interests of the patriarchal society that hides the plurality and subjectivity of individuals. From there comes the idea of the need to bring lesbians into conversation, and for that reason, naming them becomes requisite. Of course, this identity must be carefully handled. In *Ana Hiya Anti*, the lesbian protagonist's dealing with her sexuality causes an uproar that challenges these categories while seemingly affirming the human longing for an identity that they profess.

Reading Elham Mansour's *Ana Hiya Anti* makes it possible to recognize the need to construct a new framework of sexuality in which diversity is acknowledged, and genuine freedom is permitted so that individuals can exist beyond mutable and expansive concepts. The novel provides us with material that enables a fruitful conversation about lesbian identity. Mansour depicts and narrates the stories of three women, as one would

anticipate in the case of middle-class Lebanese families during the era of the Lebanese Civil War.

Siham is embodies the woman who vacillates throughout the novel between her desires and the heteronormativity enforced by homophobic Lebanon. She is struggling to build an identity that fits her desires, despite having to fight against androcentrism and the heterosexual tenets that other women, like her mother, fiercely believe in. Describing Siham's encounter with her mother, Mansour writes:

> She looked at a picture of a girl on Siham's desk, and she quickly stopped, not knowing why. Without thinking, she asked: "Who is this?" Siham's answer came cold and calm: "She is my friend Claire." Then the mother turned her eyes to all the walls and found only large pictures of naked or semi-naked women. For a moment, she recalled all of Siham's adolescence, when she was rejecting her femininity. She was upset about it, but quickly pushed this thought out of her head because she really didn't want to know because not knowing magically cancels reality. (Mansour 2000, 15)

Siham's mother is a microcosm of Arab society that represses homosexuality and thus of male authority that imposes the form of sexual desire. As Adrienne Rich puts it:

> Some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognizable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than are others. Yet each one I have listed adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives. (Rich 1980, 20)

To understand herself, Siham turns to Layal and seeks help on explaining her sexuality. The first reaction to her interest in another woman is that it is a disease. In the medical textbooks that she consults, homosexuality is described as a deviant behavior and a pathology. This is the first point of reference that the character had for its possible reality. This preachy sexology is capable of enforcing acceptable or unacceptable forms of erotic manifestation. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault argues in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978), there was an invasion of science into the pleasures of individuals,

classifying, describing, and determining the sane or morbid forms of sexual practice that would lead to a movement of oppression, control, and inspection of bodies (Foucault 1978, passim).

In her journey to discover her identity, Siham is uncertain about the reasons for her attraction to women. At first, she suggests that her father raped her, then claims that her sexual attraction towards women is natural, and later believes that her upbringing led her to love women instead of men. Nonetheless, she is always determined to assert her lesbian identity. In her conversation with Layal, Siham says:

> No, I have two other brothers, but they are much younger than me. After I lost my eldest brother, I felt that I had no luck with men. I excluded them from my life. I wanted to be in their place to take care of women as they should and as they deserve. And so I could fulfill my pleasures. I love women. What should I do? Should I change my nature? (Mansour 2000, 78)

This is a point that stimulates thought about these identities, but is not maintained in the novel. Talking about "nature" pushes the discussion back into the field of biology and shows that once again sexuality is not treated as a social construction, but as something that comes from nature. This questioning of one's own identity and the way in which discourse relates to this identity, shows how the novel offers different possibilities of dealing with and understanding the lesbian existence.

Siham openly expresses her love for women and for Layal, viewing her desires as natural. However, Layal constantly repels Siham's maneuvers. Siham writes poetry about lesbian experiences to arouse Layal's desire for her. As the civil war escalates, Siham rebels against Lebanese heterosexuality, seeking to break the social norms that women in Lebanon have long adhered to. This is why she relentlessly searches for other women who share her reality, hoping to find representation. Throughout her search, she encounters several types of lesbian women who identify in different ways while sharing the same sexual orientation, offering a multitude of lesbian opportunities.

Although Layal is not yet sure of her sexual orientation and does not share it, she seems to reject the notion of homosexuality. Layal advises Siham:

> I understand you well, but we have to try. I advise you now, as you did before, to have sex with young men, even if it was difficult at first. Maybe you get attached to one of them, and the matter is over. Think of marriage and childbearing. Forget about yourself and imitate others. Try it, even if it requires, in the beginning, a lie to oneself. Listen to me and try, and then for each incident, there is an interpretation. Siham was waiting for a different answer. She thought that Layal would hug her and she would get closer to her, but she was disappointed. (Mansour 2000, 77)

In spite of Layal's embodiment of the compulsory heterosexuality that Siham must obey, she does not imply that she is guided by heterosexual passions. Layal questions the way homosexuality is defined, fights against the mechanisms of stigmatized representation and works with other forms of that representation.

Layal is loved by both Siham and Meemee. The latter always visits Layal dressed in tight clothes to seduce and arouse her, but Layal tries to show no interest. Later, Meemee invites Layal to a women-only party and rubs herself against her. In this scene, we see Layal's body tremble at the touch, and despite finding Meemee attractive, she gently pushes her away. Mansour describes the scene as follows:

> They remained glued to one another in this manner for some time. Layal felt the warmth of Meemee's body; her senses were heightened, and she came dangerously closer. However, she retreated from Meemee's embrace. (Mansour 2000, 127)

Layal's sexual identity is complex and fragmented. She acknowledges and embraces her heterosexuality, but also experiences same-sex desires. Throughout the novel, she does not disclose much about her sexual orientation, which makes it difficult for Siham to understand and accept Layal's rejection of her lesbian desire.

Meemee is the third character in the novel. She is married but no longer enjoys sexual intercourse with her husband as she confesses her passion for women, especially

Layal. This breaks with heteronormative relationships by putting aside the male social rule and foregrounding the free sexual life of the female figure. Meemee can then be identified as the counterpart of a 'hasbian.'[12] In this case, the woman no longer plays the role of the object of the man's desire, but still stands in the foreground as a desiring individual. The presence of the man, embodied by Meemee's husband, is important only when there is a burdensome task to be performed. As they hide from the war in the basement, Meemee's husband leaves to bring coffee and food, which is interpreted by Meemee as follows: "Men benefit only in such cases, if there had not been some difficult work, we would have dispensed with them" (Mansour 2000, 81). Throughout, Meemee makes clear the exercise of her bisexuality: she is heterosexual with her husband and a lesbian with her neighbor.

In the following paragraphs, I will address bisexuality, a form of sexuality embodied by Meemee and alleged by Elham Mansour. Bisexual individuals are those who potentially experience emotional and/or sexual attraction to people of male and female genders, either simultaneously or at different stages in their lives. The first use of the term "bisexuality" dates back to the nineteenth century. In his book *Culturally Competence Practice* (2010), Doman Lum writes:

> While bisexuality, as the construct is now commonly defined, has been part of the human experience across time, *the term bisexual was coined* in the 19th century when it was defined as an attraction to both sexes. (Lum 2010, 423)

Doman Lum's etymological discussion of the term bisexuality is further and more fully developed by Kamden K. Strunk and Stephanie Anne Sheldon in their book *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education* (2022), in which they state:

> Bisexuality as a sexual and emotional practice dates back millennia (Cantarella, 2002), and the related terms "bisexed" and "bisexous" had been used as early as the 17th century to describe

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[12] The term 'hasbian' stands for the housewife who formerly identified as a lesbian, but is now married to a man and engaging in a heterosexual relationship.

Ancient Greek and Near Eastern mythological ideas about androgyny (Monro, 2015, p. 11). The first use of the term "bisexuality" as a means of anatomical classification, however, dates to 1859 when it was first used to describe human male and female reproductive structures (MacDowall, 2009). Bisexuality as a biological term was used to describe a state of arrested or maldevelopment. It then passed into the realm of sexology and psychology in an attempt to wrest it from medical discourse, which primarily focused on the treatment of illnesses that originated in the physical body. (Strunk and Sheldon 2022, 58)

In *Lesbian Psychologies* (1987), Lee Sahli and Zevy Cavallaro define bisexuality related to women as follows:

Bisexual women make individual, contextual decisions to love and make love with women and men in their lives. They make complex choices within and across different periods of their lives. By definition, bisexuals defy categorization. Some of them, sometimes, are contemporaneous bisexuals in intimate relationships with both a woman and a man. Some of them, sometimes, are sequential bisexuals in a series of relationships with people of both genders. Others are indefinitely monogamous or sexually involved with a series of people of one gender; they define themselves as bisexuals on a theoretical basis. There is no bisexual prototype: that is the center of both their significance and their challenges. (Sahli and Cavallaro 1987, 57)

Bisexuality, especially among women, is not understood as a form of behavior. Labeling a woman as "bisexual" is primarily due to the emotional and sexual attraction she feels to both genders. This idea is addressed by Paula Rust in her book *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics* (1995), arguing:

There is no evidence that the difference in beliefs about the existence of bisexuality stems from a difference in the way lesbians with varying degrees of heterosexual attraction define bisexuality. Lesbians with varying degrees of heterosexual attraction are equally likely to define bisexuality in terms of attractions as opposed to behaviors. (Rust 1995, 326)

Because of its ambivalent character, bisexuality is considered the most polemical and controversial of all sexual orientations. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler argues that within the hetero/homosexual polarity that consolidated the object of sexual desire, dealing with the possibility of pluralizing the object of desire has been a subject

of constant disagreement. This polemic is linked to the bisexual subject's psyche and sexual preferences as well. In their *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Culture* (2005), Robert Gregg, Gary McDonogh and Cindy Wong write:

> "Bisexual" is perhaps best understood as an umbrella term that means different things to the people who use it to describe themselves. Some people who identify as "bisexual" experience their sexuality differently from other "bisexuals." For instance, certain individuals who identify themselves as bisexual are attracted to others regardless of biological sex, but only have sexual relations with one sex. (Gregg, McDonogh and Wong 2005, 84)

If bisexuals usually resist rigid gender role definitions, they are still subject to social oppression beyond their sexuality and must often navigate conflicts and build their own identities. The diversity of sexuality inevitably involves contradiction and ambiguity, making it difficult for society to fully understand and accept. However, it is not necessarily expected that bisexuals will ultimately choose one side over the other in terms of their sexual orientation, as it is possible for them to continue to experience attraction to both genders.

In the existing literature, bisexuality is associated with reports of promiscuity alluding to subjects without their own identity when not marked by their invisibility. This is confirmed by Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender in their book *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* (2004) when they write:

> Feminists' negative attitude toward bisexual women was compounded by more general stereotypes of bisexuals as promiscuous and irresponsible […] Bisexual theorists and activists coined the term *biphobia*[13] to describe this kind of stereotyping and prejudice, which comes both from mainstream heterosexual society and from lesbian and gay communities. (Kramarae and Spender 2004, 111)

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[13] Biphobia is the dislike of bisexuality and bisexual people as individuals. On page 2012 of her book *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities* (2020), Nikki Hayfield writes: "*The term biphobia* is believed to have been first used by Kathleen Bennett to refer to "the denigration of bisexuality" as a valid identity."

Although this can be perceived positively in the sense that bisexual practices do not conform to stereotypes, it makes it challenging to establish a collective identity that fights for recognition. The fact that bisexuality cannot be clearly defined brings up a discussion of a type of sexuality that resists labeling, making it indecipherable and, in turn, disrupting and breaking accepted patterns of sexuality. This is confirmed by Surya Monro in her book *Bisexuality* (2015):

> There are further approaches, where bisexuality is associated with the rejection of sexual identity categories (somewhat paradoxically), or sometimes associated with queer identities. (Monro 2015, 22)

In a way, the critique of the categorization of the sex object, and thus the desiring subject, brings with it sexual, social, political, and ideological concerns that modify the debate and even the struggle for individuals' rights.

The search for a defining element in the case of gays and lesbians, while important in emphasizing such identities, not only opened up space for the characterization and representation of individuals but also contributed to the propagation of stereotypes. That is, it has helped reinforce adopted or established regulatory strategies, as in the case of homosexual/heterosexual polarization.

The lack of externalized or stereotyped elements does not make bisexuality a less important phenomenon than other sexual minorities. On the contrary, the conflict becomes more relevant when I take the discussion to a broad scenario where the possibilities are multiple. In her article "What Is This Thing Called Love?," Deborah Britzman argues that this scenario takes shape in a questioning world where binarism, in this case, male/female, is no longer sufficient to explain, define and advance social representations (Britzman 1995, 65).

In this regard, individuals who deviate from *the* accepted norm, whether through their body or sexual desire, are often viewed with a lens of suspicion. It is undeniable that

sexuality has been standardized and certain relationships have been set as the norm, which can challenge originality or the way it has been validated. Hence, in this hierarchical scheme, heterosexuality was given supremacy. The construction of sexual identity is linked to notions of difference and deconstruction. It does not entirely lose its importance, but becomes flexible and changeable in order to express a certain individuality. This makes identity an acquired and constructed process that, even when forced to follow a pattern, leaves gaps where subjectivity begins to emerge.

What is questioned in *Ana Hiya Anti* are the possibilities, legitimacy and scope of the bisexual character. The apparent invisibility of bisexuality, and thus of individuals who recognize themselves as such, has given rise to a new vision of gender relations that cannot come from a single perspective.

Sexual and gender identities are constructed and reconstructed over time, with different cultural strategies and relationships forming their fundamental basis. Naming means not only talking and classifying, but also clarifying. The specific case of Meemee's bisexuality means making more visible an orientation that, while controversial, seeks to transcend the polarity that guides her sexual choices and frees her from a binary representation, which is a reflection of the exclusionary power relations.

In *Ana Hiya Anti*, Meemee's bisexuality illustrates that sexual orientation, desires, and feelings do not always align with the discourses that usually construct representation. The impossibility of identifying an individual through a single manifest element that must conform to sex/gender and be the object of sexual desire does not invalidate the existence of other practices but rather reveals the contradictions and struggles inherent in the process of constructing her identity. It is of central importance to recognize that the acceptance of Meemee's bisexuality is also shaped by her class, race, age, social position, and historical context. This depends on how society organizes and understands sexuality

and how discourses about such practices are produced and assimilated as they are already a product of what needs to be accepted, legitimized, and regulated. Despite this, Meemee's bisexual orientation manifests through her sexual practices and thus potentially goes through the possibility of visibility and invisibility.

It is conceivable that Meemee does not have or wish to draw a symbolic boundary suitable for creating and delimiting a representative discourse with a discourse on bisexual identity. Despite the little knowledge we have of bisexuality as a political identity, bisexual practices already embody the multiple possibilities of articulation, domain, and production that subjects like Mansour's Meemee find when formulating their positions. This perspective makes us aware of the discursive boundaries through which the heterosexual imperative permits certain sexual identifications and prevents or denies others. In this respect, living or being on the border brings bisexuality into the discussion about the identification process itself. It also represents a form of naming or categorizing, as the potential refusal to fit anywhere puts these issues in a specific context, but that does not mean it needs to be markedly fixed.

Being in the border areas reveals other possible stimuli when choosing the object of sexual desire. Although, as noted, bisexuality has been defined by some negative adjectives, which characterizes the stigma attached to it, affirming a bisexual identity is acceptable. Of course, this requires a better understanding of sexuality and the discourses that are reproduced about it, which generally contribute to the construction of identities.

In the novel, Meemee reveals her bisexuality when she meets Layal and admits that she is still in a sexual relationship with her husband only because she feels forced to. She does not have any sexual desire for him, nor does she enjoy heterosexual sex. Meemee represents sexual desires that deviate from the heterosexual norm, subvert the

imposed rules that regulate the individual, and break with institutionalized patriarchal discourses and social practices, characterizing them as "queer."

In her attempt to prove her rejection of the core of heterosexuality, Meemee talks to Layal about her husband:

> He only cares that he finds food and that I am ready in bed to satisfy his sexual needs […] I am ashamed to open the matter with him because in his opinion a woman is only for procreation, for running the household, and for raising children. What's more, I'm telling you that most men are like that […] In fact, I don't like men, I don't like that kind of person, I don't know how I got married and got involved. If I didn't have children, I would have divorced and lived my life the way I wanted. (Mansour 2000, 90)

In the novel, both characters only have relationships with women and their sexual identities are not defined in relation to a male character. It is evident that the narrative of Meemee's self-discovery involves rejecting heterosexuality. The characters have a clear understanding of what they are not, what they do not identify with, and what they do not want to represent.

The desire for another woman is key for the lesbian character in question, but it is not enough to understand the many questions she still has. The search for a place where she can figure with less discomfort continues to the end of the novel. The construction of lesbian identity runs throughout the novel. Towards the end of the story, the war is to be a reason for Siham and Meemee to meet and hide out with Layal. Although they both love Layal, they start to uncover their lesbian tendencies and show their sexual desire for each other:

> At the beginning of the following week, Meemee was at the university looking for Siham. She found her, they sat in the café and talked for a long time about their situation and Layal. Each of them found in the other something from Layal; Meemee admires Siham's strength and her apparent masculinity, and Siham admires Meemee's softness and apparent femininity. (ibid, 209)

Their first and most important sexual meeting takes place in Layal's house after she has traveled. Mansour describes the scene as follows:

> They fell on the bed, which was still scented with Layal's perfume. They undressed, and the bed turned into a naked body. It turned into Layal's body who was on her birthday when Siham had to sleep in her house. She took her by the hand and said to her: "You sleep next to me in the bed." She was sleeping, after which she felt an ecstasy that she had never experienced before. (ibid, 214)

Siham, Layal and Meemee represent different women who all adopt a lesbian identity. Their assertion of this identity collides with a myriad external hurdles they battle throughout the story. Elham Mansour shows the reader that in spite of the excruciating patriarchal norms dictated by Arab society, female homosexuality can stand as a staunch opponent. Samar Habib states:

> The novel resists becoming another (stereotypical) instance of a literary, tormented homosexual anti-hero — because the torment the author inscribes does indeed exist and it reflects a reality shared by beings who are unnecessarily oppressed in their societies. (Habib 2007, 108)

In *Ana Hiya Anti*, lesbianism cannot be reduced to a single identity, as it encompasses a range of questions and practices that are intertwined with women and gender. Elham Mansour's representation of her characters demonstrates that attempting to define the lesbian as a fixed category is a challenging task. The most intricate challenge presented by female homosexuality is not its explicit representation, but rather its inherent subversion of the concepts and rules that have long been taken for granted. The appearance of multiple lesbian identities in the novel is evidence of the fragility of these concepts. *Ana Hiya Anti* shows that the association of sexual orientation with performativity only serves to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, which is at the core of traditions that deny the existence of other sexual identities.

By employing a triad of characters, Mansour presents a multifaceted portrayal of lesbian desire within the context of the Arab world. Desire, in *Ana Hiya Anti*, is both romantic and sexual. In her article "Emerging Perspectives on Distinctions Between Romantic Love and Sexual Desire," Lisa Diamond argues:

> Sexual desire typically denotes a need or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities, whereas romantic love typically denotes the powerful feelings of emotional infatuation and attachment between intimate partners. (Diamond 2004, 116)

Mansour elucidates her intention in the novel, aiming to explicate her notion of desire, which, according to her analysis, engenders comparable effects on both heterosexual and homosexual individuals, as they seek what they lack to attain a sense of complete limerence and pair bonding. Mansour posits that the genesis of desire lies within the realm of gender, rather than biological sex. While philosophical agreement with Mansour's argument is not of utmost relevance within the context of this discussion, the unintended consequence of the novel is to present a case for desire that transcends normative and oppressive societal expectations. In its portrayal of the diverse ramifications of secrecy, Mansour courageously dismantles the barriers of silence.

IV. Navigating Taboos: Lesbianism and Islam in Seba Al-Herz's *The Others*

The Others is a 2006 novel written in Arabic by Seba Al-Herz under the tile *Al Akharoun* (الآخرون). It was translated into English in 2009 by a translator who chose to remain anonymous. Seba Al-Herz is a pseudonym used by the author, whose real name is unknown. The only information the reader receives about Al-Herz's personal life is limited to two brief sentences on the back cover: "Seba Al-Herz is the pseudonym of a twenty-six-year old Saudi woman from al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia. This is her first novel." Due to its profound and incisive critique, *The Others* is regarded as one of the most exciting novels in the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia, despite its boldness. Al-Herz's courage and openness guide the narrative and its characters from oppression and terrorism to social, intellectual, and personal freedom.

In Arabic, the two words *saba* (صبا) and *seba* (صبا) are spelled exactly the same. *Saba* is a common female name that means "wind" or "light breeze." Its meaning connotes tenderness, calmness, tranquility, and reassurance. *Seba* is an authentic female name that means "youth," "longing," and "love in youth." Some people love this name, but others do not as they consider that *seba* refers to the love of youth, which they believe connotes amusement and playing with emotions. The word *herz* (حرز) has several meanings in Arabic, but most commonly refers to a fortified vessel used for preservation, or to an impenetrable place where one can seek refuge. *Der Herz* is a German word that literally means 'the heart.' In her book *Processes and Paradigms in Word-Formation Morphology* (2011), Amanda Pounder notes: "German HERZ ('heart') with the primary meaning 'organ…' and with figurative meaning 'centre/source of feeling etc'" (Pounder 2011, 128). Hence, using the pseudonym Seba Al-Herz, the author aims to delve into the

strong emotions Arab women experience in their youth, focusing on protecting them from harmful external factors.

IV.1   Saudi Arabian Minorities, Islam and the Novel

Although *The Others* was written over a decade ago, it has received limited critical attention due to the lack of research on lesbian sexuality within the Arab novel. One of the most comprehensive literary analyses of *The Others* is Zeina G. Halabi's "Ruins of Secular Nationalism," a chapter from her book *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual* (2018). In her study, Halabi examines the themes of loss, violence, struggle, social and religious relevance in the novel, as well as the political rhetoric in Saudi Arabia. In her introduction to the novel's analysis, Halabi argues:

> Specifically, I challenge the overarching interpretation of Saudi women's writing as an apolitical or explicitly antipolitical mode of writing by suggesting an alternative reading of Seba al-Herz's *The Others*. (Halabi 2018, 134)

The novel tells the story of an unnamed teenager attending an all-girls university in a Shi'a-dominated area in Saudi Arabia. The protagonist, much like her peers, has no interactions with men outside of her family. When the protagonist's female lover Dai tries to seduce her, her shame is overshadowed by a strong longing for physical and emotional closeness. Dai leads her into a hidden world of lesbian love, a world where the thrill of attraction intertwines profoundly with obsession. Halabi contends:

> One of the most controversial so-called Arab chick-lit novels to appear in the last decade is Seba al-Herz's *The Others*. Despite the novel's political sub-text, critics have been drawn exclusively to its scandalous portrayal of graphic sex and homosexuality within a tight-knit community of Saudi women. One such critic describes Seba al-Herz as an agent provocateur, set on scandalising Saudi society with homosexual sensationalist narratives in order to shake off Saudi social and religious conservatism. (ibid, 133-134)

Chick-lit, also known as women's fiction, is a literary genre that explores themes of the female experience through predominantly female protagonists. This genre often features characters navigating everyday situations as they strive to achieve their goals. Etymologically speaking, and according to Stuart Taberner in his book *The Novel in German since 1990* (2011):

> The term 'chick lit' was coined in 1995 by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey De Shell for the title of their anthology of 'postfeminist' fiction. As Mazza observes, they did not anticipate that ten years later [their] tag would be greasing the commercial book industry machine. (Taberner 2011, 246)

Chick-lit explores a range of topics beyond romantic relationships, including work, family, friendships, and social critique, all through the lens of modern, independent, and courageous women. Written by and for women, chick-lit has established a place among other genres, particularly in the past few decades during which female empowerment has gained momentum.

The Others belongs to the chick-lit genre due to its young protagonist, who embodies a range of relatable experiences including doubts, worries, social and family dilemmas, and minor obsessions. Al-Herz effectively captures these elements, which are tackled by Halabi as well:

> Despite its Orientalist reception and self-Orientalising discourse, it is vital to read the Arab 'chick-lit' as a complex and subtle literary genre that compels us to search for new theoretical frameworks in order to understand the extent of its authors' political critique. (Halabi 2018, 133)

The novel takes place in Al-Qatif, an area located in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula, is known for being one of the most conservative societies in the Arab world. Because it houses Islam's two holiest sites, it is among the most significant Islamic countries globally. In his book *The History of Saudi Arabia* (2000), Alexei Vassiliev describes the centrality of Islam in Saudi

Arabia by stating:

> The two holiest cities of Islam are on Saudi territory: Mecca with
> the Kaaba, towards which believers turn during prayers and
> where they perform the *hajj* (pilgrimage), as prescribed by
> Islamic canons; and Medina, the resting-place of the body of
> Muhammad, the founder of Islam. The increasing tension
> between Islam and the West, combined with growing religious
> sentiment in the Muslim world, means that many socio-political
> conflicts (including those between states and ethnic groups in the
> Islamic world itself) have religious overtones. (Vassiliev 2000,
> 12)

Saudi Arabia is a predominantly Sunni country, but it also has a significant

population of Shi'a Muslims, particularly in the eastern cities of Al-Qatif, Hasa, and

Dammam. Although the Saudi government imposes restrictions on Shi'a religious

practices[14], it has allowed the celebration of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura in the city of

Qatif[15]. These restrictions are due to Saudi Arabia's identity as a Sunni-majority country.

The Sunni-Shi'a conflict is a historical religious dispute between the two largest Islamic

sects: Sunnis and Shi'a. The conflict is based on several disparities, but the main reason

for the strife lies in the question of succession after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The

Sunnis believe that the Prophet Muhammad's successors should be Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq

and Omar Ibn Al-Khattab (two of the *Khulafa' Al-Rashidun*) (الخلفاء الراشدون)[16], while the

Shi'a believe that his successor should be Ali Ibn Abi Talib. The intensity of the dispute

increased after the Battle of Karbala in 680, in which Hussein, the son of Ali Ibn Abi

Talib and his family were killed. This is confirmed by O. Bengio and Meir Litvak in their

book *The Sunna and Shi'a in History* (2014):

> From the very beginning, the Sunni-Shi'i divide revolved mainly
> around political issues, which did, however, also involve

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[14] See the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom 2005*, 2006, p. 637.
[15] See *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, 2004, p. 1970.
[16] The name of the *Khulafa' Al-Rashidun* is given to the companions of Prophet Muhammad. *The Khulafa'* took over the rule of the Islamic state after his death in the eleventh year of the *hijrah*. They numbered four: Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, Othman Ibn Affan, and Ali Ibn Abi Talib. For more detail, see Abdullah Ahsan's book *The History of Al-Khilafah Ar-Rashidah* (Skokie, Chicago: IQRA' International Educational Foundation, 1994).

doctrinal elements regarding the authority of the rulers. (Bengio and Litvak 2014, 2)

In his book *Historical Dictionary of Saudi Arabia* (2020), historian J. E. Peterson describes Al-Qatif as follows:

> [Al-Qatif] was an important trading center and Christian center from early times and had a long connection with Darin on nearby Tarut Island. The present town of Al-Qatif dates from roughly the same period of the eighth - ninth centuries, and it was held by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Al-Qatif is unique in Saudi Arabia in that the great majority of its population consists of indigenous but nontribal Arabs of the Shi'ah sect. It was the site of Shi'ah demonstrations after the Iranian revolution of 1979, protesting Saudi government neglect. (Peterson 2020, 217)

Zeina Halabi also discusses the situation of Al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia by arguing that "the city has been the epicentre of political dissent in Saudi Arabia since the establishment of the Wahhabi[17] Saudi state" (Halabi 2018, 135-136).

Given the history of Al-Qatif, Seba Al-Herz has chosen a Shi'a protagonist to emphasize the centrality of minority groups inside Saudi society. Unlike Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia has a Sunni Muslim majority, meaning Saudi Shi'a make up a small minority of 8 percent according to David Sorenson (Sorenson 2013, 81) and 15 percent, according to Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Ibrahim Al-Marashi (Goldschmidt and Al-Marashi 2018, 405). The protagonist's belonging to the minority is dual since she is also a lesbian. Halabi argues:

> [The protagonist] is Shi'i in a predominantly Sunni national community; a woman in a gender-segregated society; a woman with homoerotic desires in a heteronormative patriarchal society; and an epileptic in a close-knit community that shames congenital illness. (Halabi 2018, 137)

The protagonist in Al-Herz's novel struggles to understand and define her emotional and physical needs, but her commitment to religion remains firm. As a student

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[17] Wahhabism is an Islamic trend that emerged in the 18th century. It is the work of the theologian Mohamed Ben Abd Al Wahhab who lived from 1743 to 1792. It provides for both doctrinal and conformity to Sharia and religious practices as in the time of the Prophet.

at an all-girl university, she studies science and Islamic jurisprudence and is actively involved in producing and distributing politically dissident literature. She joins her colleagues in openly expressing Shi'a resistance and protest by wearing clothes with Shi'a signs. In addition, she participates in religious summer courses, volunteers, and writes for a magazine that promotes proper moral and cultural education in line with Shi'a ideology. Like her peers, she wears a black shirt on the tenth of the month of Muharram, which coincides with Ashura.

Ashura is an important religious event in Islam that falls on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It holds significance for both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, although the way it is observed and the reasons behind its importance can vary between the two sects. For Sunni Muslims, Ashura marks the day when Moses (Musa in Islam) and the Israelites were saved from Pharaoh's tyranny when God parted the Red Sea, allowing them to escape. Some Sunnis also associate other events with Ashura, such as the day Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. For Shi'a Muslims, Ashura is notable due to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein Ibn Ali, Prophet Muhammad's grandson. Hussein resisted the Umayyad caliph Yazid's demand for allegiance, defending what he believed was the rightful leadership of the Islamic community. This led to Hussein's tragic death and the day is commemorated with mourning, reenactments, processions, and passion plays, expressing solidarity with his sacrifice. Some Shi'a Muslims may also engage in acts of self-flagellation as a sign of their grief and solidarity with Hussein's suffering.

To fully understand the novel and how the narrator deals with the various ways of marginalization as a disabled, queer Shi'a woman, it is necessary to have an understanding of the complex political history behind the act of self-harm during Ashura. In *The Others*, Al-Herz portrays the censorship of the Muharram religious practice as a

way of empowering the Shi'a cause. The Saudi Shi'a community's marginalization by society as a result of religious, political, and social oppression is a critical aspect that the novel uncovers. The protagonist says: "I have inherited a superabundance of weeping that goes back to an ancient era" (Al-Herz 2009, 65).[18] Al-Herz connects Shi'a religious identity with the theme of exclusion and ongoing "othering." This serves as both a form of resistance against government and religious authority, which are intertwined in Saudi Arabia, and as a demonstration of the community-building benefits that come from enduring persecution.

The inflexible societal norms and expectations found in Saudi society create a division between men and women. Paradoxically, this gendered segregation often unintentionally fosters close bonds and emotional connections among individuals of the same sex, creating an environment where homosexual attraction and interaction can emerge. Al-Herz's protagonist exemplifies the constraints and liberties associated with this socially divided society. Growing up with many brothers and a father, the narrator's interactions with men in general, particularly unrelated ones, are limited. Moreover, due to her epilepsy—a hereditary ailment that is implicitly associated with breeding, although not explicitly confirmed by the author or translator—she has minimal prospects of entering into an arranged marriage, making her an unsuitable candidate for matrimony. Despite the Saudi prohibition of same-sex relationships, the narrator becomes acquainted with and explores the realm of lesbian pleasure, having numerous private opportunities to form intimate connections with other women, primarily due to her restricted access to men.

In Saudi Arabia, male and female homosexuals are treated severely. Similar to Shi'a Saudis, lesbians are also considered a minority. In her book *The A to Z of the*

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[18] The novel was originally written in Arabic in 2006 and published by Dar Al-Saqi in Beirut, Lebanon.

Lesbian Liberation Movement (2009), JoAnne Myers states that in Saudi Arabia, lesbians are still invisible or persecuted (Myers 2009, 34). This is a sign of the resistance that Al-Herz wants to inspire through her protagonist, which Halabi also emphasizes:

> Upon its translation into English, The Others became a sensation in American popular media. A reviewer in New York Magazine writes: 'This Saudi novel, in which a closeted lesbian Shi'i girl feverishly narrates her struggles and affairs, offers a rare personal glimpse into the repressive Kingdom. (Halabi 2018, 134)

The Others brings us a lesbian woman's story narrated by Seba Al-Herz. Her writing is imbued with her relationship with the world of women and the attempt to represent the self and rebel against all forms of restriction on individual freedom. In the course of the novel, the reader is repeatedly drawn into the world of women, as the author gives her female characters a voice on humanitarian and nationalistic issues. In fact, this perception best brings us to the edge of contact with the questions that this novel raises in the context of sexuality, through the premises of the search for identity, and the problem of writing itself, its content, and meaning.

The questions of how a woman in the Arab world can and does write are always controversial. In Arab milieus, the act of writing has long been a gendered space in favor of men. Women authors occasionally adopt pseudonyms, including male names, to embody alternative discourses that challenge the constraining societal norms and limitations on their agency and identity. Halabi discusses the act of writing using a pseudonym or an anonymous name as follows:

> Writing anonymously or pseudonymously is not uncommon in Arabic and particularly Gulf women's literature. The Saudis Samira Khashoggi (1935–86) and Sultana al-Sudayri (1940–2011), for instance, began publishing under pseudonyms in order to avoid social stigma and religious conservatism in the early and mid-twentieth century. That the author of *The Others* feels bound by the same constraints that prevented the preceding generations of women writers from publishing openly speaks to the political climate that Seba al-Herz must navigate not only as a woman, but

also as a Shi'i writer within Wahhabi nationalist cultural institutions. (Halabi 2018, 135)

Seba El-Herz puts more emphasis on writing about female sexuality in Saudi Arabia than on proving herself as a novelist. The presence of (homo)sexuality is the main theme she addresses in her novel, leading to the creation of a broader space in which Arab women's lesbianism is highlighted and openly discussed, with a focus on the obstacles faced by Arab lesbians. In Saudi Arabia, the novel's geographical location, lesbianism, though cherished, is confronted with the Islamic ban on homosexuality. This leads to a whirlwind of psychological conflicts between the protagonist's adherence to Islamic teachings and the choice of her sexual orientation.

IV.2   The Language of Lesbianism, Sexual Expression and Islam

The problem of femininity is a concern for women in the Arab world. They are often expected to participate in the production of feminine discourse that focuses on women and gender, which mirrors the patriarchy prevalent in Arab countries. Gender plays an active role in the Arab world supports the emancipatory call for the Arab women's movement. In their book *Dalil Annaqid Al-Arabi* (دليل الناقد العربي) (*The Literary Critic's Guide*) (2002), Mijane Ruweili and Saad Al- Bazi'i define gender as a concept that touches on all aspects of life, be they social, political, economic, legal, psychological, or biological. They assert that this definition has paved the way for various studies and research on gender. The authors emphasize the importance of gender by arguing that it is an integral part of our lives:

> Perhaps the main drive in studies is the liberal advocacy of women's movements in their focus on the concept of gender as an analytical factor that reveals the biased presuppositions in cultural thought in general and Western thought in particular. (Ruweili and Al- Bazi'I 2002, 149)

Arab women continue to confront gender-biased attacks that infringe upon their right to exist as independent individuals. Male hegemony in the Arab world still obstructs them, regardless of their sexual orientation. Although discussions about homosexuality in the Arab world typically focus on male homosexuality, lesbianism has been present in Arab societies for a long time, but has been trivialized and dismissed because it is a woman-related issue. As a result, lesbian Arab women must navigate a patriarchal society that degrades them, as well as a heteronormative culture that ostracizes and stigmatizes their sexuality. They must also contend with the shame imposed by society and Islam's long-standing prohibition on homosexuality.

Despite numerous attempts to reconcile Islam with homosexuality, the religion's position remains firm in forbidding both male and female homosexuality. The story of Lot's people is often cited to support the view that the sin was attributed only to male homosexuals, as there is no direct reference to lesbianism in the Qur'an or Islamic teachings. Nevertheless, Islam's stance on sexuality is unambiguous: any sexual intercourse outside of marriage, commonly known as *zina* (زنا) (adultery), is considered *haram* (حرام) (forbidden by religion). In her book *Women And Islam* (2004), Haideh Moghissi states:

> Among the crimes forbidden by Islamic Shari'a Law is *zina* (adultery or sex out of wedlock). Both the Qur'an and the Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and deeds) made clear the penalty for such a crime is 100 'medium' lashes in public for unmarried women (and men) and stoning for married women (and men). What is clearly emphasised in the Qur'an, the Hadith and jurisprudence is the importance of establishing that *zina* has taken place. The evidence can be gained through repeated confessions, the testimony of four rational adult eye-witnesses, or pregnancy. (Moghissi 2004, 114)

Islam prohibits *zina* to prevent the intermingling of lineages, which can lead to confusion and illegitimate inheritance claims. The preservation of the family system and family life is one of the pillars of Islam, and adultery threatens this by destroying families.

Furthermore, the prohibition of *zina* is meant to protect people from sexually transmitted diseases that can have serious consequences, including death. Islam also forbids *zina* to preserve women's dignity because the prevalence and permissibility of adultery can lead to the degradation and objectification of women. Another reason for the ban is to reduce the number of abandoned children and curb the spread of crime. *Zina* can lead to a rise in violent crimes such as murder, as seen in cases of revenge killings by male spouses or lovers. Hence, Islam prohibits *zina* to protect individuals, families, and society as a whole.

In Islam, the sources of legislation are the Qur'an and the Hadith, Prophet Muhammad's sayings. When an issue is controversial and not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an or the Hadith, the third source of legislation is *ijma'* (إجماع) (consensus). *Ijma'* is generally understood as the consensus of *ulema'* (علماء) (Islamic jurists or scholars) who specialize in the relevant field. However, any rule or verdict reached through this process cannot contradict the Qur'an or the Hadith. The fourth source of legislation in Islam is *qiyas* (قياس) (analogy), which is used to derive a verdict on a subject that is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an or the Hadith but is similar to another subject that has already been addressed in those sources. The application of *qiyas* is subject to strict conditions to ensure its validity and consistency with Islamic principles. In his book *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia* (2017), Cenap Çakmak argues that in classical Arabic, qiyas stands for comparison and measurement (Çakmak 2017, 1281). When discussing the religious connotation of the term, he notes:

> Later, probably in the mid or late ninth century, *qiyas* became a technical term to denote analogy—the method of inquiry and argumentation in three disciplines of Islamic scholarship: grammar, law, and theology. This development is parallel to or intermingles withthe use of *qiyas* to translate syllogism (from Greek) in Arabic philosophy. (ibid, 1281)

In the Qu'ran, for example, there is a clear and indisputable ban on all alcoholic beverages, which God describes as an 'intoxicant'.[19] In this regard, *qiyas* is applied to agree on Islam's ban on wine as well although it is not mentioned in the Qur'an or the Hadith because wine and and other alcoholic beverages share the same *'illa* (علة) (inconvenience), which is *iskar* (إسكار) (intoxication). Hence, wine definitely becomes *haram*. *Ijma'* and *qiyas* are both part of *ijtihad* (إجتهاد), meaning conscientiousness or diligence.

Ijtihad, an integral concept within *fiqh* (فقه) (Islamic Jurisprudence), is a form of hermeneutics that pertains to the process of employing autonomous reasoning and interpretation to derive legal rulings from the Qur'an and the Hadith. This intellectual endeavor necessitates the diligent exertion of *mujtahidun* (مجتهدون) (qualified scholars). The purpose of *ijtihad* lies in its capacity to adapt Islamic law to effectively address novel circumstances and challenges that may lack explicit guidance within the original sources. Through *ijtihad*, *ulema'* are empowered to extract legal opinions and formulate judgments by means of comprehending and interpreting Islamic teachings, employing principles of reasoning such as *qiyas*, *ijma'* and other methods of legal deduction. *Ijtihad* is the duty of those capable of it in order to demystify people's confusions and to answer their questions, as encouraged by the Qur'an when it comes to unclear matters regarding Islam.[20]

The debate over Islam's view of homosexuality is always ongoing even though it is unanimously believed that Islam forbids *zina*. Keith E. Swartley, in his book *Encountering The World Of Islam* (2005), points to the Islamic *tahrim* (تحريم) (prohibition) of *zina* and the acts leading to it:

> All sexual relations out of wedlock and all manners of talking,
> walking, looking, and dressing in public that may instigate

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[19] See (Qur'an, Al-Baqarah, 2:219), (Qur'an, An-Nisa, 4:43), and (Qur'an, Al-Ma'idah, 5:90-91).
[20] See (Qur'an, An-Nahl, 16:43) and (Qur'an, Al-Anbya, 21:7).

temptation, arouse desire, stir suspicion, or indicate immodesty and indecency. (Swartley 2005, 102)[21]

Several authors have attempted to convey a positive new attitude of Islam toward homosexuality. In 1999, Sabine Schmidtke wrote an article entitled "Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Islam," in which she claimed that homosexuality had long been present and treated tolerantly in Islamic culture:

> In the eyes of medieval Western writers, Islam's allegedly tolerant and even encouraging attitude towards sexual practices between people of the same sex was yet another indication of Islamic self-indulgence. (Schmidtke 1999, 260)

Many writers have explored the relationship between Islam and homosexuality, arguing that same-sex relationships were not previously condemned by Islam, and that homosexuality was present during the time of the Prophet, without him denunciating or criticizing it. In their book *The No-Nonsense Guide to Islam* (2007), Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies state that "there is no evidence to suggest that Prophet Muhammad ever punished anyone for sodomy" (Sardar and Wyn 2007, 122). This point was of interest for further authors to claim that Islam had tolerated homosexuality and that, for them, it is the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith that needs to be reconsidered.

In her book *Islam and Homosexuality* (2009), Samar Habib writes:

> The theological debate that many within Islam have been engaged in for centuries often omits consideration of the impact religious rulings have on believers' lives. Theology and the rules that bind it often ignore the human experience and refer to homosexuality as an object, a behavior, a sin, without recognizing that sexual preference can be a major constituent of the religious self. (Habib 2009, 11)

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[21] For more on sexuality in Islam, see (Qur'an, An-Nisa, 4:15-16, 19, 22-25), (Qur'an, Al-Ma'idah, 5:5), (Qur'an, Al-Isra, 17:32), (Qur'an, Al-Mu'minun, 23:5-7), (Qur'an, An-Nur, 24:2-5, 30-31, 33), (Qur'an, Al-Furqan, 25:68-70), (Qur'an, Al-Ahzab, 33:30), (Qur'an, Al-Mumtahanah, 60:12), (Qur'an, At-Talaq, 65:1), (Qur'an, At-Tahrim,66:10), and (Qur'an, Al-Ma'arij, 70:29-30).

For Habib, any choice based on desire and preference is part of religiosity. She believes that Muslims who are deprived of the right of choice cannot be truly religious as this affects their inner serenity and is therefore detrimental to their religious practices and rituals. Habib also considers Islamic texts and their interpretations in relation to homosexuality. According to her:

> Islam's sacred texts offer possibility for reinterpretations that inspire, rather than obstruct, thought, dialogue, and expression. Islam can be queried and queered—and I argue that indeed it has been—in a way that reaffirms faith, not negates it. Engaging the divine to find new answers to questions posed by modernity and allowing for a dialogue would require Muslims to be comfortable with multiple interpretations and multiple Islams (which, again, may already exist). (ibid, 491)

In addition to Samar Habib, Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle tries to show that homosexuality, per se, is not banned in Islam. In the foreword to his book *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010), he states that "for many Muslims, dealing with homosexuality or transgender issues is a matter of sin and heresy, not difference and diversity" (Kugle 2010, 8), and asserts that some people are simply homosexual by nature rather than choice (ibid, 8). In referring to Lot's people and how the Qur'an describes their story, Kugle writes:

> The Qur'an mentions them obliquely and does not assess them negatively, but it also does not deal with their existence as a minority social group. Instead, the Qur'an addresses the majority who are oriented toward the other sex, that is heterosexuals whose sexual urge can result in procreation and replication of the social order. Where the Qur'an treats same-sex acts, it condemns them only insofar as they are exploitative or violent. (ibid, 13)

Kugle tries to prove that Islam, contrary to all scholarly interpretations of the Qur'ran and Islamic jurisprudence, does not represent an antagonistic attitude towards homosexuality. He urges readers to carefully examine Islam's positive attitude toward homosexuality, asserting:

> Yet, simply quoting Islamic texts with regard to transgender, lesbian, and gay believers without critiquing and reinterpreting the texts only perpetuates the injustice done to them in the name

of religion. (ibid, 20)

Kugle's key point is that there is a gap between the negative view of homosexuality held by many Muslims and the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith, which he argues are not entirely against homosexuality. He asserts that the punishment of Lot's people in the Qur'an was not specifically for their homosexuality. Kugle suggests that the Qur'an can be interpreted as a critique of all forms of lust rather than solely queer acts, and that not all Hadiths are strongly critical of homosexuality, though some remain ambiguous. He contends that the interpretation of the Qur'an is not an immutable, but rather a fluid and evolving process that can accommodate diverse ideas and visions. He bases his argument on the idea that "a gay or lesbian Muslim is no less than a heterosexual Muslim, except by the intangible criterion of pious awareness of God (*taqwa*)" (ibid, 12).

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed's book *Homosexuality, Transidentity, and Islam* (2019) supports Kugle and Habib's arguments by demonstrating that Islam has a positive attitude towards homosexuality and that the prevailing belief that it has always prohibited homosexuality needs to be revisited. Zahed is a French Muslim gay man who believes that being gay does not diminish his level of religiosity and piety. He explains that the conflation of practicing religious teachings and engaging in homosexual intercourse is complementary, rather than incompatible, as is commonly believed:

> Ten years ago (meaning in 2009), I decided to challenge publically the widely held notion that same-sex desire and Islam were an impossible pair, that these different aspects of our identities were incompatible. (Zahed 2019, 11. Brackets mine)

To defend French, mostly Muslim, homosexuals, Zahed created an association called HM2F (Homosexuels musulmans de France) (Muslim Homosexuals of France) in 2010. He also started an inclusive Mosque in Paris, which he argues is "the first of its kind in Europe" (ibid, 12). Zahed notes:

> As a teenager adhering to a conservative interpretation of Islam,

> I memorized half the Qur'an. The beauty of its texts, which I found steeped in universalism, enthralled me. Then, at the age of seventeen, I began to come to terms with the fact that I was gay. After more than fifteen years of reflection on gender, sexuality, and the place of minorities in Islam, I now understand that the Qur'an does not explicitly refer to "homosexuality," nor does it refer to women as "inferior," nor to Jews as our enemies. Indeed, the strict, dogmatic interpretation of some verses of the Qur'an is no longer tenable, especially in the eyes of progressive Muslims across the world (even if we remain, for the time being, a minority). (ibid, 12)

What Zahed aims to demonstrate is that the collision between Islam and queerness is not as intense as some Qur'an interpreters have surmised.

Kugle, Habib, and Zahed agree that a Muslim person can practice religious rituals, be devout, and adhere to the teachings of Islam while also being homosexual. They argue that sexual orientation is innate and should not be punished or criticized because of religion. According to them, being homo- or heterosexual has no bearing on one's love and worship of God. They believe that the gender of one's partner is inconsequential as long as the partnership is contractually equal. What matters to them is the ethical nature of the relationship, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity, within the bounds of one's inner disposition (Kugle 2010, 14).

While Kugle, Habib, and Zahed argue that Islam and homosexuality are compatible, their interpretations of the Qur'an could be considered biased because they are all openly homosexual. Therefore, many non-homosexual Muslims do not agree with their views as they perceive them as an attempt to reconcile their sexuality with religion, which is not possible according to all interpretations of Islamic teachings. According to the Qur'an, Lot scolded his people for committing *fahisha* (فاحشة), which denotes acts of lewdness and obscenity. The Arabic terms *fohsh* (فحش), *fahsha'* (فحشاء), and *fahisha* all refer to grave deeds or statements that violate social norms and moral codes. The term *fahisha* is typically associated with extramarital sexual acts. In the Qur'an, God explicitly

forbids *zina*, describing it as *fahisha*: "Do not go near adultery. It is truly a shameful deed and an evil way" (Qur'an, Al-Isra, 17:32). Therefore, the argument that the sin of Lot's people was not homosexuality is inconsistent with the Qur'anic account, as it clearly labels their actions as *fahisha*.

Kugle's allegation that the Qur'an condemns Prophet Lot's people only because they were exploitative and violent is, for Muslims, a fallacy. The verse describing their deeds and condemnation cannot be open to myriad interpretations. Surah Al-A'raf informs us: "And remember when Lot scolded the men of his people, saying, "Do you commit a shameful deed that no man has ever done before"" (Qur'an, Al-A'raf, 7:80)? Then God put more *ta'akid* (تأكيد) (emphasis) on this *fahisha* by following the verse with a more revealing one: "You lust after men instead of women! You are certainly *musrifun* (مسرفون) (transgressors)" (Qur'an, Al-A'raf, 7:81). In the Qur'an, the word *musrifun* refers to those who transgress the limits of God's commandments. The verse that follows Lot's blame on his people illustrates their reaction to his advice. After Lot's rebuke, the verse states: "But his people's only response was to say, 'Expel them from your land! They are a people who wish to remain chaste'" (Qur'an, Al-A'raf, 7:82)! By showing that Lot was described by his people as "chaste," the Qur'an indicates that they recognized their wrongdoing, which religion regards as *fahisha*. Although the Qur'an confirms in other Surahs that they were violent and bandits, the primary command they received from Lot was to abandon their homosexuality.

In Surah Hud, the verse that speaks about Prophet Lot's *fahisha* documents God's punishment upon them:

> When Our command came, We turned the cities upside down and
> rained down on them clustered stones of baked clay, marked by
> your Lord O Prophet. And these stones are not far from the pagan
> wrongdoers! (Qur'an, Hud, 11 :82-83)

All Muslim interpretations of the verses in the Qur'an regarding Lot agree that God's

punishment on them was very severe for the *fahisha* (lewd acts) they had been committing. This contradicts Kugle's interpretation claiming that they were punished because they were criminal and violent. Although the Qur'an describes many people who had been committing bad deeds and had been violent, it states that they were not as severely punished as Lot's people. For example, Pharaoh and his people were punished only by drowning, the people of Aad were punished by wind and the people of Thamud were punished by thunderbolt.

The Hadiths, as the second source of legislation in Islam, strongly condemn male homosexuality. In one of the Hadiths, Prophet Muhammad said: "He who does the deed of Lot's people is cursed."[22] In Arabic, the word 'cursed' is *mal'un* (ملعون) when used to describe a man and *mal'una* (ملعونة) for a woman. Both are adjectives derived from the verb *la'ana* (لعن) and whose noun form is *la'na* (لعنة), meaning banishment and expulsion from goodness. In Islam, God's *la'na* is His act of excluding those who deserve to be excluded from His mercy, and this is something that only God possesses. In another Hadith, Prophet Muhammad said: "There is nothing I fear for my *Ummah* (أمة) (people) than the deed of Lot's people."[23] There is disagreement among Muslim scholars regarding the *sihha* (صحة) (authenticity) of the Hadiths that dictate the type of punishment that should be applied to those accused of homosexuality. Some Hadiths, such as those narrated by imams Ahmed (2732), Abu Dawud (4462), Ibn Maja (2561), Al-Tirmidhi (1456), Abu Ya'la (2462), Al-Baghawi (2593), and Al-Bazzar (9079), confirm that the punishment for male homosexuality is *hadd* (حد)[24] (in this case death). Nevertheless, the

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[22] Ahmed, 1878, cited in Islam Q&A, "Misfortune of a wife whose husband is committing sodomy," Fatwa 26197, accessed 08 Dec, 2021. https://islamqa.info/en/answers/26197/misfortune-of-a-wife-whose-husband-is-committing-sodomy. This hadith is classed as *sahih* (authentic) by Al-Albani in *Sahih Al-Jami' As-Saghir Wa Ziyadatouh*, 5891).

[23] Al-Tirmidhi, 1457 and Ibn Maja, 2563. This hadith is classed as *sahih* (authentic) by Al-Albani in *Sahih Al-Jami' As-Saghir Wa Ziyadatouh*, 1552.

[24] The *Hadd* in Islam is the punishment that falls on the body, including fulfilling the rights of God, and it is the punishment stipulated by Shari'a, whether it is a right for individuals or for God. One of the conditions for Haddis that whoever it is performed on must be physically and mentally sound.

way this penalty should be executed has always been a subject of debate. The lack of a clear earthly punishment in the Qur'an has caused Muslim scholars to differ in their opinions on the way punishment is executed. Nonetheless, they all agree on Islam's severe prohibition of homosexuality.

In her article "Homosexuality in the Middle East," Serena Tolino argues:

> When looking at the *sunna* (Prophet Muhammad's teachings), all the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad on homosexuality are deemed non-authentic by experts of *hadiths* [...] They are simply reported as historical truths because they constitute a powerful means for deterrence, as their moral value is unquestionable for Muslims. (Tolino 2014, 80)

It is incorrect to claim that all of Prophet Muhammad's sayings regarding homosexuality are non-authentic. In Islam, the *sunna* (سنة) complements the Qur'an. For example, while the Qur'an commands Muslims to pray, the manner of performing ablution and prayers is learned from the *sunna*. Additionally, many subjects mentioned in the Qur'an were taught by Prophet Muhammad so that his people perform them correctly. Serena Tolino's assumption that these Hadiths are merely historical truths on which Muslims base their rejection of homosexuality is a misleading approach as it implicitly suspects the *sihha* (authencitiy) of other or all Hadiths. Tolino's argument will, in turn, lead to the questioning of all Islamic teachings deriving from Prophet Muhammad. *Imams* Ibn Taymiyyah[25], Ibn Al-Qayyim[26], Al-Mawardi[27] and Al-Omrani[28] all agree that male homosexuality is *haram* in Islam and should be punished by death.

As regards lesbianism, it is illicit in Islam, but the degree of its indecency is lower than that of *zina*, for *zina* refers to extramarital sex with vaginal and/or anal penetration. In his book *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law* (2019), the international Islamic

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[25] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' Al-Fatawa* (مجموع الفتاوى), p. 335.
[26] Ibn Al-Qayyim, *Rawdat Al-Muhibbin Wa Nuzhat Al-Mushtaqin* (روضة المحبين ونزهة المشتاقين), p. 372.
[27] Al-Mawardi, *Al-Hawi Al-Kabir* (الحاوي الكبير), p. 223.
[28] Al-Omrani, *Al-Bayan fi Madhab Al-Shafi'i* (البيان في مذهب الشافعي), p. 367.

scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali confirms that "*zina* and lesbianism are different in that the latter does not involve penetration nor does it threaten purity of the family lineage" (Kamali 2019, 94). In this respect, the punishment for lesbianism is not death. This was already tackled by the renowned Muslim scholar Ibn Hajar Al-Haythami in his book *Azzawajir 'An Iqtiraf Al-Kaba'ir* (الزواجر عن اقتراف الكبائر) (*Deterrences on Committing Major Sins*), in which he asserts that lesbianism is undoubtedly forbidden and a *kabira* (كبيرة) (major sin).[29] Yet, Islamic jurists agree, in *Al-Mawsou'aa Al-Fiqhiyyah* (الموسوعة الفقهية) (*Encyclopedia of Jurisprudence*) that there is no *hadd* punishment for lesbianism as it is not *zina*; rather, it must be punished with *ta'zeer* (تعزير) punishment, through which the judge punishes the woman who does it with a penalty that discourages her and others from doing it again.[30]

Islam affirms that male and female bodies have an *'awra* (عورة). The word *'awra* means "defect" and "lack" in Arabic, and in the Islamic religion, it refers to the parts of the body that must be covered and that people, in some cases, are not allowed to look at. A man's *'awra* is between his navel and his knees, while a woman's *'awra* encompasses her entire body except her face and hands up to the wrist. The aim of covering one's *'awra* is to avoid *fitna* (فتنة) (social disorder) and avoid arousing other people to sexual attraction and desire, which consequently can seduce them into *zina* or the actions leading to it. The *'awra* must inevitably be covered when the man or woman is praying or when they are outside their home. Gerald Drissner, in his book *Islam for Nerds* (2016), states:

> Islam uses the Arabic term 'Awra to denote those parts of a body

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[29] Ibn Hajar Al-Haythami, *Azzawajir 'An Iqtiraf Al-Kaba'ir*. See *kabira* number 362. In Islam, the word *kabira*, singular of *kaba'ir*, stands for the major sin that the person commits and that requires punishment.
[30] *Encyclopedia of Jurisprudence* (24/252). *Encyclopedia of Jurisprudence* is the largest modern jurisprudence encyclopedia published by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs of Kuwait, and is a modern and documented formulation of the legacy of Islamic jurisprudence up to the 13th *hijri* century. The number of its volumes has so far reached 45 large volumes, and it was classified in the form of terms arranged in alphabetical order to facilitate research for academics and students of forensic science. In addition, 200,000 references from the encyclopedia's text to various jurisprudential references have been added. The Encyclopedia includes 3,000 jurisprudential main headings and 27,000 subheadings arranged in an objective classification.

> which must not be exposed to anybody except one's wife or husband, or, in case of emergency or illness, to a doctor. Furthermore, the whole topic is not only about showing these body parts to any other person, but also about looking at them if a person exposes them, which is forbidden for Muslims. (Drissner 2016, 587)

The emergencies to which Drissner alludes are mentioned in the Qur'an. If the Muslim person is obliged to take a step that is considered *haram*, they will not be blamed or declared sinful especially if their health or life is at stake. In Surah Al-Baqarah, the verse tells us:

> He has only forbidden you to eat carrion, blood, swine, and what is slaughtered in the name of any other than Allah. But if someone is compelled by necessity—neither driven by desire nor exceeding immediate need—they will not be sinful. Surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Qur'an, Al-Baqarah, 2 :173)

This compulsion is applicable to all aspects of life and refers to situations where an individual finds themselves in a difficult position that forces them to commit a forbidden act. This concept is similar to that of *'awra*. However, in situations where there is no compulsion, any disclosure of *'awra* or intention to transgress God's commands would render the person sinful, unless they belong to one of the three categories of people that Prophet Muhammad spoke about in a Hadith. Three types of people are never considered sinful or held responsible for any misdeed: the sleeper until they wake up, the child until they reach puberty, and the insane until they come to their senses and become sane.[31]

Besides being considered *fahisha*, homosexuality is prohibited in Islam because it is an act of fully exposing one's *'awra* to another person who is not the husband or wife. This is one of the reasons why lesbianism, while dissimilar to *zina*, is still considered *haram*. Male homosexuality, however, is undoubtedly regarded by the Qur'an and the

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[31] This Hadith was narrated by *Imams* Ahmed, Ibn Maja, Al-Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud. This Hadith was narrated by *Imams* Ahmed, Ibn Maja, Al-Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud. See also See also (Tarazi 1995, 17), (Yust, Johnson, and Sasso 2005, 355), (Hodgkinson 2013, 79), (Bearman and Peters 2014, 125), and (Rassool 2018, 49).

Hadiths and viewed by Muslim scholars as a *kabira*. It is associated with *zina* in the *hadd* punishment, but considered more hideous because the Qur'an proves that God's punishment of Lot's people rested solely on them. Islam proscribes lesbianism because being chaste, keeping the *'awra* out of the eyes of anyone other than the husband and not engaging in extramarital sexual activity are all overlooked in lesbian encounters, which is clearly contrary to God's commandments. In Surah Al-Mu'minun, we find a straightforward verse that says:

> Those who guard their chastity except with their wives or those bondwomen in their possession, for then they are free from blame, but whoever seeks beyond that are the transgressors. (Qur'an, Al-Mu'minun, 23:5-7)

In *The Others*, the protagonist is deeply committed to Islam but struggles with reconciling her lesbian orientation with her religious beliefs. She experiences feelings of guilt and self-blame, as she believes that homosexuality is considered a sin in Islam and that she is *mal'una*. While she does not seem to be unhappy about her sexual orientation per se, the challenge for her is to find a way to live a fulfilling life while also adhering to her religious convictions. Muslims who identify as homosexual can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first group argues that there is no inherent contradiction between being Muslim and homosexual, adopting the arguments upheld by scholars such as Habib, Kugle, and Zahed. The second group, however, struggles with the tension between openly expressing their sexuality and feeling as though they are not living up to the expectations of their faith, which emphasizes the importance of divine *rahma* (رحمة) (mercy).

Seba Al-Herz portrays the protagonist as a young woman who is naturally attracted to women and has harbored lesbian desires since early childhood. Despite this, she constantly reflects on how Islam views her sexuality. Throughout the story, the reader oscillates between the portrayal of the protagonist as a freely and convincingly lesbian

woman and as a woman who wants to curb her lesbianism and become pious.

After her lesbian encounter with Dai, the young woman whom she is very much in love with, the protagonist thinks:

> I must get away now. I am choking to death. My chest floats in a bed of dark mud, and kisses steal my breaths from me in a room where the air is foul. This is not happening. It has not hap pened. I will go out of this room now, and I will fall. I will tumble into a well of oblivion. With a little bit of effort, I will be able to forget. I will be able to slip out in silence, outside of Dai. If I open the door, new air will come bursting into this room and I can fill my chest with it. I can run. Memory does not have two legs that can carry it against the wind. I can pray. God will be generous with me; God will wipe from the list of my sins another black mark. I can kiss my mother and I will not find that bitter taste returning to my mouth, the taste of my burning intoxication: Dai. (Al-Herz 2009, 15)

The inner dialogue the protagonist has with herself is a result of the intimate moments she has with Dai. She reflects on how this experience has challenged her previously held beliefs and values, causing her to question her own morality. Muslims acknowledge that no human being is *ma'sum* (معصوم) (infallible) and that all people may commit sins. Yet, when a person persistently commits sins without feeling remorse or a desire to change their behavior, they may be accused of *al-israr 'ala al-ma'siyya* (الإصرار على المعصية) (insistence on committing sin).

Through the above-mentioned phrase "with a little bit of effort," the protagonist is referring to the Islamic concept of *jihad an-nafs* (جهاد النفس), which involves the struggle for self-restraint and self-resistance. For Muslims, this struggle is ongoing and difficult, as it requires the constant effort to stay on the path of God and resist the temptation to disobey Him and follow Satan. The struggle is challenging because the soul is constantly drawn towards fulfilling its desires, which can be plentiful and overpowering. Moreover, many people sin with the help of Satan, who incites them to defy God through different ways.

Muslim scholars have identified that *an-nafs* (النفس), the self or the soul, is one entity with three attributes, each named according to the quality it possesses. The first attribute is *an-nafs al-ammara* (النفس الأمارة) (the commanding soul), which is the aspect of the self that urges a person towards evil and encourages them to pursue their desires and pleasures, regardless of whether they are forbidden or permitted. This soul represents the source of immorality and wickedness. The second attribute is *an-nafs al-lawwama* (النفس اللوامة) (the reproachful soul), which is characterized by its instability. This soul vacillates between good and evil, with its desires sometimes overpowering it, causing the person to fall into disobedience and feel guilt, regret, and fear afterwards. It is considered better than the first soul because the person possessing it does not persist in sinning. The third attribute is *an-nafs al-mutma'inna* (النفس المطمئنة) (the reassuring soul), which is associated with the highest level of serenity the self can reach. This soul is at peace with itself and content with the guidance of God. It does not seek to satisfy its desires, but rather seeks to fulfill its purpose in life by following the straight path of God. It elevates its actions from the state of the soul that leads to evil until it reaches the level of calm and tranquility, bringing the person peace and a sense of safety (Qur'an, Al-Fajr, 89:27-30).

In *The Others*, the Muslim protagonist embodies the characteristics of the self-reproaching soul, as she experiences a conflict between her lesbian desires and her religious beliefs. The more she indulges in her homosexuality and finds satisfaction in it, the guiltier she feels about violating the teachings of Islam. This is evidently inferred when we read her words:

> I can't wash my dirt off with soap and water. I'm tired of constantly washing my hands and mouth, of how often I take a shower, of my anxiety when I'm lying on my back or spreading my legs. (Al-Herz 2009, 12)

In the Islamic register, there are many words used to refer to wrongdoing and sin, which can be used interchangeably. In fact, they do not represent the same degree of sin,

but they are all part of *al-ma'siyya* (المعصية), which means abandoning what has been commanded by God and the Prophet and doing what they have forbidden in terms of both outward and inward words and deeds. There is a difference between *dhanb* (ذنب) and *ithm* (إثم). The former refers to any act that goes against God's commands mentioned in the Qur'an, forsaking some of or all the duties that God has commanded or doing what He has forbidden, and for which the sinner is punished. The latter refers to any intentional act that deserves slander. It includes major and minor sins and is mostly used with *kaba'ir* (كبائر) (major sins). While the two words are mainly used interchangeably by scholars, some verses in the Qur'an do not consider them as being coeval.

Wizr (وزر) is an Arabic word meaning the heavy burden, from which the Arabic words *wazir* (وزير) and *wazira* (وزيرة) (minister) derive as he/she bears the burden of the responsibility entrusted to them. In the Qur'an, *wizr* means sin, which God describes in Surah Fatir: "No soul burdened with sin will bear the burden of another" (Qur'an, Sura Fatir, 35 :18). There are other words related to wrongdoing in Islam like *sayi'a* (سيئة) and *khati'a* (خطيئة), which is almost similar to *dhanb*.[32]

Seba Al-Herz emphasizes two Arabic concepts that relate primarily to religion, be it Islam or Christianity, namely *tohr* (طهر) and *'ohr* (عهر), meaning purity and immorality respectively. In *The Others*, the protagonist says:

> What happened is that Dai split me into two parts: my body that boasts of its sweetness, and my desire to purify itself from its sins, formidable in opposition to the power of moral accumulation, which puts in its first laws my body as a criterion for correcting me, and referring me to one of two categories: *tahira* (pure) or *ahira* (a whore). (ibid, 14)

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[32] For more on the types of sins, see Mahmoud Abderrahman Abdelmoun'im's *Mu'jam Al-Mustalahat wa Al-Alfadh Al-Fiqhiyya* (معجم المصطلحات والألفاظ الفقهية) (*A glossary of Jurisprudential Terms and Expressions*). The book consists of 3 volumes with1731 pages arranged in alphabetical order. The book was published in 1999 by Dar Al-Fadila in Cairo, Egypt.

The Arabic words *tahira* (طاهرة), meaning 'immaculate' or 'pure,' and *'ahira* (عاهرة), meaning 'a whore' when used as a noun and 'immoral' when used as an adjective, are part of the main foundations through which an Arab woman regards sexuality. In Muslim circles, *Tahara* (طهارة) (cleanliness) and *'iffa* (عفة) (chastity) are the most important characteristics of a good, believing woman. *Tahira* protects herself and others from being tempted by her arousing qualities and exudes good morals. Muslims attach great importance to *tahara* or *'iffa*. In Surah At-Tahrim we find a verse that talks about how the Qur'an values *al-mar'a al-afifa* (المرأة العفيفة) (the chaste woman):

> There is also the example of Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her womb through Our angel Gabriel. She testified to the words of her Lord and His Scriptures, and was one of the sincerely devout. (Qur'an, At-Tahrim, 66:12)

Having this quality is not merely a trait that a woman grows up with or a habit she acquires from childhood. It is the fruit of self-restraint (*jihad an-nafs*), which has the effect of purifying the soul and overcoming vices. For Muslims, this is a normal quality that all women should strive to have.

In many contexts, the word *tahira* is used to describe a woman who possesses refined and good manners, always chooses good companionship, uses kind and decent language, treats people gently, is amenable to advice, avoids pride, hypocrisy and insulting words, maintains her connection with God, and aims to preserve her faith. The adjectives *tahir* (طاهر), for a man, and *tahira* (طاهرة), for a woman, are related to the noun *tahara*, which means cleanliness, safety, and freedom from dirt and filth, whether sensual or moral. Sensual *tahara* relates to the cleanliness of the body, clothing, and surroundings, encompassing many aspects of bodily cleanliness, including cleaning the mouth, washing, removing dirt and bad odors, and avoiding all that could harm others, whether

in worship, solitude, or in the company of others. Moral *tahara* refers to ethical uprightness. In Islam, *tahara* is a sine qua non for prayers.

'Ahira is a Classical Arabic word that means 'whore' or 'harlot.' It is used to refer to *al-mar'a al-fasida* (المرأة الفاسدة) (the corrupt woman). *Fasad* (فساد) means corruption and is used in this context to indicate immorality. There is a rich vocabulary in Classical Arabic to refer to the *'ahira*. Some of the words meaning 'whore' are *zaniyya* (زانية), *saqita* (ساقطة), *fajira* (فاجرة), *fahisha* (فاحشة)—used here as an adjective— *fasiqa* (فاسقة), *musafiha* (مسافحة), *moumis* (مومس) and *ba'iat al-hawa* (بائعة الهوى), which literally means 'floozy.'

In Maghrebian countries, the colloquial word used to refer to an *'ahira* is *qahba* (قحبة) and in Egypt and most Middle Eastern countries, it is *sharmouta* (شرموطة). In their book *Gender, Language and the Periphery* (2016), Julie Abbou and Fabienne H. Baider note:

> The word *qahba* a 'whore' derives from the stem *qahaba* which signifies in Classical Arabic 'to cough', referring to the semantic field of old age and disease: *mar'atun qahba* denotes 'an old woman who has a cough'. Then, a semantic shift took place and the sexual feature was added. The Lisan al Arab (1995) specifies that this extension of meaning in Classical Arabic was influenced by the fact that sex workers used to signal their availability to their clients by a subtle cough. (Abbou and Baider 2016, 55)

Today, the term *qahba* is present in almost all Arab countries, as even societies that use the term *sharmouta* to refer to a prostitute sometimes use *qahba* as a stronger term to imply more stigma and contempt. In some contexts, a woman may be designated as *'ahira* based on the extent to which she defies or rebels against societal norms. In Egypt and many other Arab countries, a woman may be considered a *sharmouta* if she lives alone, laughs out loud, smokes, wears tight, short or provocative clothes, or talks to many men on the street. In this way, a woman may not be charged with *zina*, but may still be designated as *'ahira* for crossing the social and cultural boundaries that other women do not.

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In their book *The Body in Language* (2014), Matthias Brenzinger and Iwona Kraska- Szlenk discuss the term *sharmouta* and contend:

> Egyptian women tend to resist the term (...) because they understand how easily it can be used to criticize any woman who defies social codes of female respectability in one way or another. It operates at the intersection of female sexuality and independence. (Brenzinger and Kraska- Szlenk 2014, 326)

The challenge of resisting male control and power often drives society to label any defiant woman as an *'ahira*. An *'ahira* is a woman who breaks the mold and flouts the rigid patriarchal system that her country abides by. Even during times of war or conflict, when a woman from the opposing side is imprisoned or taken hostage, she may be labeled as an *'ahira*. Ronit Lentin's book, *Thinking Palestine* (2008), discusses the detainment of Aisha, a Palestinian woman who is being tortured by Israeli interrogators. Aisha describes how she was interrogated:

> He grabbed his whip and whipped me on the legs, then on my shoulders and back and said: 'You *sharmouta* want to be stronger than men... we shall see if you can take this.' He continued to whip me all over my body while uttering every dirty word in and out of the language dictionary. (Lentin 2008, 181)

In *The Others*, the protagonist grapples with Saudi society. She understands that she is considered an *'ahira* because a lesbian woman fiercely bucks the rules that all Saudis are expected to adhere to. The protagonist's *'ohr* not only concerns her lesbian relationship with Dai but also the fact that she falls outside the normative scope of sexuality and Saudi cultural values. This is why the protagonist asserts: "And so I was *aahira*" (p. 12).

IV.3   Lesbianism and the Breaking of Arab Cultural Barriers

Culture, Society and Sexuality (2006), a book edited by Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, contains a highly critical chapter by American feminist and anthropologist Gayle S.Rubin entitled "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of

Sexuality." Rubin's article not only became one of the foundational texts of queer studies but also continues to generate excitement because it argues that marginalized sexualities should be valued in societies that have historically privileged heterosexuality as the only valid sexual orientation.

Despite being relatively unknown, Seba Al-Herz has established herself as an author who explores the sexuality rejected by Arab and Saudi societies. While there is a long history of Arabic literature featuring characters with diverse sexualities that reflect the complexity of human nature, *The Others* is exemplary in that it portrays lesbianism as a natural and admirable identity. Like other Arabic texts about non-normative sexualities written before the twenty-first century, the novel highlights the oppressive social constraints that the Arab lesbian faces, making identity construction a challenging process. Correspondingly, *The Others* is a remarkable addition to the repertoire of queer Arab(ic) writing.

The novel tells the story of a lesbian woman who finds joy in her sexuality despite the stigma and pressure that surround it. Al-Herz incorporates sexuality as one of the many themes in the plot, which also includes discussions on loss, violence, politics, and religion:

> If my room, before, was my stern isolation from everything outside, the bathroom became my ultimate refuge, where no one could violate or disturb me, nor could they see the marks of violation on me, abbreviated or whole. All I had to do was to close the door to be sure that no one would see me. The door was my trustworthy guard, and the breach through which I could penetrate to my special private world that concerned no one but me. The bathroom was where my brain was—my slate. My thoughts are my chalk, a chalk of pure white. I will color the world in the light of God, and my own world is no exception. (Al-Herz 2009, 65)

The protagonist struggles with varying internal conflicts resulting from her experiences in life, including those related to the issues mentioned above. At times, she expresses her desire to fit into Saudi social and cultural norms, while at other times,

dissents against them. It is noteworthy to discuss Al-Herz's novel and its portrayal of lesbian women, their homoerotic relationships, desires, and affections. However, the conflicts surrounding these relationships are not only personal but also social, political, and academic. Through *The Others*, Al-Herz seeks to defend queer sexuality and to shed light on the intersections of sexuality, culture, and politics, highlighting the need for greater representation and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and identities, especially those addressed by female Arab authors.

In discussions of lesbian identity, one must consider the possibilities of female sexuality since there is no standard or normative model. Unfortunately, discourse often attempts to associate lesbian women solely with masculinized women. It is important to note that these discursive practices only reinforce the imaginative character of lesbianism and overlook the fact that a lesbian's self-understanding transcends male caricatures. Being a lesbian has nothing to do with abolishing femininity or devaluing women

The Others belongs to the genre of fictional lesbian narratives, which has been the subject of much debate in the United States. The genre encompasses several factors, such as central lesbian characters, a focus on love and passion between women, an expression of the visions and desires of the lesbian community, and authorship by openly lesbian writers. In the chapter "When is a Lesbian Narrative a Lesbian Narrative?," from her book *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), Marilyn Farwell argues:

> For instance, Bonnie Zimmerman, in her important book, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989*, assumes a position as an active, political lesbian-feminist. Zimmerman demands that, to be included in her study, a lesbian novel be thoroughly self-conscious, that it have "a central, not marginal, lesbian character, one who understands herself to be a lesbian," that it put "love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of its story," and also that it have self-conscious lesbian writers and readers. Lesbian narratives function as "a *mythology* for the lesbian community" and therefore work didactically, serving lesbians better than patriarchal stories. (Farwell 1996, 11)

In the Arab context, women writers often develop a feminist critique of the dominant narrative, particularly in relation to the representation of the female body, sexuality, and desire. In Al-Herz's novel, for example, the protagonist serves as a metaphorical lesbian subject, challenging and breaking down stereotypes surrounding lesbianism.

The novel can be described as highly sexual because of its explicit portrayal of lesbian sexuality, including the use of sensual language and detailed descriptions of the intimate scenes between the protagonist and Dai. Nonetheless, the use of the word "sexual" should not be used to condemn the work or to suggest that the erotic tone detracts from the feminist struggle. Lesbianism is explicit throughout the novel:

> Dai did not even manage to close her eyelids as the kiss descended, but rather aimed her gaze directly at my eyes to search out her effect on me. I could not keep this fantasy going, though. We were not in a scene from the cinema. This was something more than that, something much more substantial. Dai had brought all of her considerable cleverness and intelligence to the task. She built a trap for me and I promptly fell into it, easy enough prey. With an engagement ring engraved with her name on it and a kiss on the palms of my hands, Dai would bring this scene of hers to its dramatic fullness before an audience of her friends her other friends. She would be able to say, this girl is my possession. She's mine. Don't you see what swirls around her finger, the sign and shadow of my ownership? (Al-Herz 2009, 137)

The protagonist is depicted as a woman caught between the expectations and restrictions imposed by society and religion, and her own desires towards Dai. Despite these pressures, her natural inclination towards loving women is portrayed as a fundamental aspect of her identity. The novel presents the protagonist as fully aware of her innate homosexuality, but struggles to reconcile this aspect of her identity with the societal norms that seek to delegitimize it. She says:

> And so I was *aahira*, a slut, and I had conducted myself to hell. Before me lay two solutions by which I could bring back my twin and regain the duality that was me, unalterable and coincidental, body and spirit. I could seek forgiveness for my sin, or I could live under the protective umbrella of denial, not simply denial of what I had done, but also of the painful notion that lay hidden behind it,

> which told me that I was something other than what people
> naturally are. I could deny it until, with time, what I had done
> would be forgotten, so that the sin would lose its stark sin-like
> image. (Al-Herz 2009, 12)

Al-Herz emphasizes the importance of accepting one's sexuality as natural and genuine, and presents the protagonist as a model of self-awareness and authenticity as a lesbian woman. Through her journey of self-discovery, the protagonist raises important questions about Arab perceptions of gender, sexuality and femininity.

Being genuinely lesbian proves that marginalized orientations are not the result of artificial circumstances or the influence of other people. This relates to the concept of "the lesbian self" identified by Bonnie Zimmerman in her already mentioned book *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989* (1990), in which she argues that in order to diversify the construction of this lesbian subject, the authors must dispel the inner belief that being lesbian is not natural (Zimmerman 1990, 41). Leigh Gilmore discusses Zimmerman's identification of "the lesbian self" in her book *Autobiographics* (1994), arguing:

> By situating lesbian self-definition in the feminist rhetoric of the
> multiplicity of identification, Bonnie Zimmerman locates
> challenges to the narrative practices by which lesbianism, as well
> as other identities, is rendered authentic and natural, as evidence
> of a legitimate self. Zimmerman finds these challenges
> specifically in lesbian auto-biography committed to the
> representation of multiple identities [...] (Gilmore 1994, 230)

It can be seen that natural language is paramount to the protagonist's self-affirmation. The emphasis on naturalness is an influential socio-political tool. The protagonist is psychologically affected by her lesbianism due to her religious, social, and cultural background. This shows that her sexuality, per se, is not the source of her guilt. This argument rests on the premise that her lesbianism is genuine, which means that it is not the result of trauma, rebellion, or passing fads.

Although the novel portrays homosexuality as genuine, the protagonist's

lesbianism is portrayed as transgressive, since Arab society regards female homosexuality as a violation of Arab mores. This prompts the reader to question and reconsider traditional discourses on sexuality. In this respect, Seba Al-Herz's use of a more direct and accessible language to discuss the relations between the sexes, and in particular, the identity of the lesbian woman, without censorship, makes the novel transgressive. Al-Herz dares challenge the heteronormative model by presenting possibilities of female homosexual desire through her depiction of sex and lust between women.

The novel approaches what Adrienne Rich, in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," calls "lesbian existence." According to Rich, being a lesbian represents the qualities and knowledge of women that have made women the first erotic and emotional choice (Rich 1980, 29). This existence becomes apparent when the protagonist describes how she would be aroused by anything she might associate with lesbian relationships. She says:

> In my childhood, the old-fashioned air conditioner in my room was my hero. In my mind, the control dials were a pair of amber eyes, and the whirring blades a mass of tousled hair. The blades made a delectable light scratchy sound, an echo like the one that seems to rise off your skin when you wake up. Every night, the air conditioner was my own brave warrior, facing off against my nightmares and fears and the dampness of my bed. (Al-Herz 2009, 11)

The way the protagonist describes the fan is reminiscent of the queer feelings she has had since childhood. Al-Herz speaks of the protagonist's early desire for women to emphasize that her sexuality is innate and not influenced by external factors. In this way, the protagonist endeavors to demonstrate that her attraction towards women is not transient, but rather originates from a profound, intrinsic core within her. This viewpoint is elucidated by Sonja Vivienne in her book *Queering Safe Spaces* (2023):

> At the beginning, when we are first born, we are 'seen' and classified according to our genitalia and citizenship status. We are labelled with a gender and a name. We are presumed heterosexual

and cisgender unless later proven otherwise. (Vivienne 2023, 68)

Although the character is very young, she has already developed sexual desire, and although memories of precocious eroticism might startle readers, Al-Herz does not represent it as an anomaly. On the contrary, it is represented as a natural aspect of human sexuality. The protagonist understands from an early age, although not fully aware of her sexuality, that the erotic feelings she experiences could be considered innate. The Richian concept of "lesbian existence" is reflected in the protagonist's natural desires. In Al-Herz's previous quote, desire is not meant to be a deviance, nor a product of unresolved trauma, problems, or complexes. It implies that denying her orientation and desires would go against the protagonist's nature, and that her identity precedes any social impertinence. In the novel, the focus on naturalness is also related to the naturalization strategy. The novel denounces all that society perceives as scandalous. If hegemonic society forces one to perceive heterosexuality as natural, the novel makes behaviors considered unacceptable and traditionally seen in a negative light appear normal.

The Others is transgressive in that it denaturalizes the artificiality of heteronormativity and emphasizes the validity of lesbian sexuality. Although society condemns it, lesbianism is imaged as a type of sexuality that is not a derivative of any other sexuality. Through Al-Herz's portrayal of the protagonist, lesbianism is a valid sexual desire that is likely inherent in a female persona from childhood.

The desire that the protagonist has for Dai is represented as natural in that it lets the reader discover that the protagonist seeks not only sexual but also emotional gratification from Dai. She is depicted as being sexually attracted to Dai and emotionally drawn to her. In the absence of Dai, the protagonist describes her state of restlessness as follows:

> I sat down at the white marble table, fished my cell phone out of
> my bag, and left a missed call for Dai. If she wasn't busy right

> now, she would call back without a doubt. I needed her voice,
> with its easy tone, somewhere between gelatin and the viscosity
> of honey. Whenever Dai laughed, I felt the ether surrounding her
> loosen its joints in some fundamental sense, to the point of
> dislocation. (Al-Herz 2009, 70)

This means that the lesbian protagonist in Al-Herz's novel has the possibility and opportunity to describe herself, to live her sexuality more subjectively through emotional attachment, to break with social and cultural stereotypes surrounding homosexuality, and to view lesbianism as a sexuality that does not necessarily have to belong to a pre-established pattern. As the protagonist allows Dai to disrobe, she looks at herself in the mirror, captivated by the simultaneous allure of her own body and the intensity of desire reflected in her lover's gaze, sending her into a "state of rapture" and giving her a "feeling of bliss." (Al-Herz 2009, 65)

The Others invites us to reflect on the specifics of being a lesbian in twenty-first-century Arab society. The protagonist's lesbianism is presented as an unchanging sexual orientation to which she has been attached since childhood. However, towards the end of the novel, she finds it mandatory to be with a man rather than remain a lesbian. The protagonist's characterization makes the reader aware of the contradiction between her desire to be seen only as a woman who desires other women and the perpetuation of prejudice through her discriminatory behavior against lesbians with male gender performance as if lesbian identity needed to be standardized in order to be accepted by society. In her discussion of heterosexual relationships, the protagonist says:

> Whenever I got close to negotiating with the idea of a certain
> man's existence in my life, I had to think about the possibility of
> there existing a man who would be right. But the sheer question
> of sexual nature would shove me off course every time I allowed
> an opportunity to perch in my mind. I am not someone to give my
> body to strangers. I do not invite to my bed those who will put on
> their clothes in the morning and go away and not come back. I
> cannot detach my body from my soul; I cannot fill one of them up
> while the other remains hungry. There is an enormous distance
> between releasing my body into the whirl of its desires, and being

cheaply and easily available. (Al-Herz 2009, 230)

When I talk about identity, I am also dealing with a political positioning that needs to be socially affirmed. In the case of the protagonist, femininity as part of her lesbian identity is prone to be suspended within the heteronormative pattern in the face of the fear of speaking openly about her sexual orientation. It seems reasonable to assume that it is imperative to transform this often stigmatized identity into an instrument that shows its different ways of existence in the most diverse spaces.

Through her protagonist, Al-Herz alludes to the fact that perhaps because of the impulsiveness of its own nature, hidden desire cannot remain discreet for that long. In his book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), French author and philosopher Georges Bataille argues that eroticism leads to the path of solitude. This happens precisely because this longing ends in secret when it comes to erotic desire. Bataille writes:

> My starting point is that eroticism is a solitary activity. At the least it is a matter difficult to discuss. For not only conventional reasons, eroticism is defined by secrecy. It cannot be public. I might instant some exceptions but somehow eroticism is outside ordinary life. In our experience taken as a whole it is cut off from the normal communication of emotions. There is a taboo in force. Nothing is absolutely forbidden, for there are always transgressions.[33] (Bataille 1986, 252)

Therefore, eroticism becomes a realm of forbidden desires in society. In the novel, the protagonist finds herself on this path of desire and loneliness, unable to openly express her sexual feelings.

Al-Herz's portrayal of sexuality reinforces the solitary nature of eroticism and makes the protagonist's homoerotic desire more explicit. I have aimed to highlight different themes related to lesbian identity and female homoeroticism, and reflect on hardened and biased discourses about lesbians that have persisted over time and do still

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[33] The book was originally published in French in 1957 by Les Editions de Minuit in Paris under the title *L'Erotisme*. It was then translated into English by Mary Dalwood in 1986.

persist. These discourses often view bodies and identities as marginal, transgressing heteronormativity, which stands a social and cultural foundation that judges and subjugates those who oppose it.

Desire is more sensitively constituted in Al-Herz's novel, taking into account the historical context. The common discourse that the lesbian woman must put on a performance of masculinity is undone by Al-Herz when she critiques this stereotype through the main character's femininity-based portrayal of the lesbian woman and her identity. In this sense, *The Others* allows the reader to question, examine, and reconsider the stereotypes attributed to lesbian women and to understand that lesbian identity is fluid.

V. Lesbian Reactions to Heteropatriarchal Syria in Samar Yazbek's *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*

Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah (رائحة القرفة) is a 2008 Arabic novel written by Syrian author Samar Yazbek. It was translated into English by Emily Danby in 2012, under the title *Cinnamon*, and into German by Larissa Bender in 2014, under the title *Die Fremde im Spiegel*. Samar Yazbek was born in Jableh, a Syrian city near Latakia, which is a major port city in Syria that borders Turkey to the north. She studied Arabic literature at the University of Latakia and works as a journalist and author. In March 2011, after the beginning of the revolt in Syria, she was forced to leave the country to Paris, where she currently lives. She published three volumes of short stories: *Baqat Kharif* (باقة الخريف) (*Autumn Bouquet*) (1999), *Mufradat Imra'a* (مفردات امرأة) (*Woman's Lexicon*) (2000), and *Jabal Al- Zanabiq* (جبل الزنابق) (*The Mountain of Lilies*) (2008). She also devoted herself to writing novels, including *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah* (2008) and *Laha Maraya* (لها مرايا) (*She Has Mirrors*) (2012). Her novels present a critique of the controversial aspects of contemporary Arab reality, be they social, sexual or political. To explore how Samar Yazbek proposes and problematizes a possible lesbianity in her work, I include *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah* in my corpus, as Yazbek focuses on characters with conflicted selves and ambivalent feelings about their sexual desires and orientation.

V.1   (Homo)sexuality, Social Strata and the Subversion of Patriarchy

Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah discusses the theme of homosexuality in contemporary Syrian society. The novel delves into the phenomenon of gender role hierarchy and highlights the deep divide between different social classes, which is based on Yazbek's representation of the rhetoric of power that controls social strata. One of the essential

elements of the novel is the passionate relationship between two women: the elderly and wealthy Hanan, and her young and poor maid, Aliyah. Both women fight against patriarchal Syrian society. The sexual practices between women appear as a reaction to a patriarchal system that restricts and objectifies them. Contemporary Syrian society is organized according to rigid gender segregation and does not encourage free exchange between men and women. Women are thus forced to satisfy their desires in the only place they have free access to, which is the universe of women. The relationships between women are not presented as the result of a healthy and legitimate desire, but as the product of a society that suppresses individual freedom.

The novel is set in Damascus, Syria, and is told in the third person. Yazbek delves into a society permeated by corruption and oppression in the context of the relationship between Aliyah and Hanan. The characters' private lives reflect the broader state of poverty, hierarchy and ignorance inherent in Syrian society. Aliyah, a girl from a large family, was raped due to the insatiable sex drive of her unemployed father, who feeds on the money his wife and children earn as maids. Aliyah took the name of an older sister who was crippled by her father's kick after he had caught her and his wife hiding money from him to feed the brothers and sisters' starving stomachs. The older sister was repeatedly raped by a neighbor while she could not move until the protagonist, younger Aliyah, caught him in the act with her sister.

Aliyah's aggressive personality has led her into numerous battles with the leaders of the slum gang. During these confrontations, she has bitten, kicked, and even used a knife to slash them. The slums of Damascus are like hunting grounds, where young women constantly struggle to maintain their physical integrity and safety, although their efforts often prove futile. Eventually, Aliyah was raped while scavenging for trash on a pile of garbage. Following the incident, she resisted her father's aggression and abuse by

refusing to go to work and staying at home. Aliyah does not conform to the expected silence, complacency, or subservience typically imposed on her and those in similar circumstances. When it became clear that her rebellious spirit could not be tamed, she was forced to leave the neighborhood. Consequently, her father arranged for her to work as a maid in Hanan's villa.

Hanan al-Hashimy was born into an aristocratic family in Damascus. Unlike Aliyah, Hanan grew up as a quiet and reserved daughter of privilege. She was the object of her self-centered mother's affection, who took pride in raising a submissive and obedient daughter. Hanan was pressured by her family and her overbearing mother to marry a cousin she had grown up with and considered a brother. The cousin was also coerced into marrying Hanan, whom he had always seen as a little sister. Hanan eventually developed strong feelings of disdain and disgust toward her husband, a character who is largely absent from the narrative. These feelings stem from the fact that she was compelled to engage in sexual relations with him.

The novel addresses the violence, dependency, and oppression that are typical of the lives of many women in contemporary Syria. In this regard, Yazbek's aim is to spot light on the profound social inequalities prevalent in Syria, particularly with regard to the situation of women across various social strata. In his book *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (2006) (*The Alawite Region and the Syrian Power*), Fabrice Balanche demonstrates that Syrian society is characterized by significant wealth disparities. He contends:

> The vertical organization of Syrian society is extremely effective
> in blocking any social ascent and reproducing the power of
> community elites who are also economic elites. (Balanche 2006,
> 284)[34]

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[34] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "l'organisation verticale de la société syrienne est d'une redoutable efficacité pour bloquer toute ascension sociale et reproduire le pouvoir des élites communautaires, qui sont également des élites économiques."

Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah is one of the novels that were published after Elham Mansour's *Ana Hiya Anti*. Similar to Mansour's novel, *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah* received numerous reviews in newspapers and blogs, the majority of which praised the work for its well-crafted and structured content.

Scholarly papers and articles on this work are scarce. Nonetheless, these reviews commend Yazbek's writing for its moral merit, specifically her skillful use of the taboo issue of homosexuality to highlight the injustices caused by poverty and persecution. In her article "The Contemporary Syrian Novel in Translation," Hanane Marie McManus argues that Yazbek's political activism and militancy are responsible for the positive reception of her novel:

> Yet in this novel about two women's intimate world, readers will be hard pressed to find direct representations of Syrian society on the brink, as it were, of a revolution that has had ambiguous implications for women. (McManus 2014, 326)

This idea was upheld by Yazbek herself in an interview with Martina Censi. In her article "Rewriting the Body in the Novels of Contemporary Syrian Women Writers," Censi reports Yazbek's words as follows:

> Actually I wanted to talk about the changes in Syrian society, the disappearance of the middle class and the great difference between the world of the upper classes and that of lower classes. (Censi 2015, 299)

Censi argues that the relationship between the two protagonists, which initially seems to be a non-violent alternative to heterosexual relationships, ultimately exhibits the same tendencies toward violence and oppression. Censi also contends that homosexual relationships are not a matter of free choice, but rather result from the breakdown of communication between men and women. In her article, "Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature," Hanadi Al-Samman argues that homosexuality is often used as a means of expressing dissatisfaction

and anger. She asserts that portrayals of homosexuality, especially lesbianism, are seen as precursors to pathological deviation from or temporary replacement of conventional heterosexuality (Al-Samman 2008, 307). This explains the prevailing attitudes in much of the criticism, which emphasizes Aliyah's and Hanan's victimization as a prelude to or justification for what is perceived as a lesbian encounter.

Samar Yazbek demonstrates that sexuality is a central aspect of an individual's life. In the novel, gender and social class are interdependent and hierarchical. These hierarchies serve to maintain the inequality-based social structure. Heterosexual relationships are marked by dissatisfaction and violence: Aliyah grows up with an abusive father who beats his children; Hanan is forced by her father to marry her cousin. For the two protagonists, the lesbian relationship represents an escape from a sorrowful past, which surfaces in the narrative through the use of analepsis, thereby interrupting the chronological order of the story and offering insights into the characters' past experiences. Their affair goes through several stages that mark the change of roles between the two women. Their relationship takes on the characteristics of a mother-daughter one. When Hanan bought Aliyah, she was only ten years old. The first physical contact between the two women occurs in Hanan's bathroom when the latter asks her maid to wash and massage her body. If, in the beginning, this relationship can be seen as the sexual molestation of a minor, it gradually turns into a relationship between lovers.

Women subvert patriarchal norms by engaging in subversive same-sex relationships, using their bodies as a means of performance to challenge traditional sexual patterns. While these patterns may seem unchangeable, Yazbek's bold and meticulous handling of the subject of lesbianism sends a message of empowerment and freedom to women. According to Judith Butler, a body is considered subversive when it does not conform to the heteronormative norms dictated by patriarchal society. In *Bodies That*

Matter (1993), Butler writes:

> Indeed, the legitimation of homosexuality will have to resist the force of normalization for a queer resignification of the symbolic to expand and alter the normativity of its terms. (Butler 1993, 111)

Judith Butler's take on subversion is also discussed by Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins in their book *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life* (2007), where they argue:

> Butler is referring to subversive practices whereby gender performatives are "cited," grafted onto other contexts, thereby revealing the citationality and the intrinsic—but necessary and *useful*—failure of all gender performatives. (Lovaas and Jenkins 2007, 63)

The sexuality depicted in *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah* involves overtly subversive sexual acts that deviate from the prevalent heterosexual mindset of patriarchal culture. This transgression is intended to convey a sense of feminine strength on the part of Aliyah and Hanan. Despite the presence of features of social corruption and indications of absolute despair on the part of the protagonists, most critics of the novel missed or downplayed these aspects. The lesbian relationships portrayed in the novel are acts of rebellion and, as such, contain elements of empowerment. Thus, Samar Yazbek holds that heterosexual scenes are often characterized by dirtiness, repulsiveness, violence, and oppression, while lesbian encounters are full of pure love and embody a sense of pleasure, arousal, and tenderness. The novel begins with an image of a partially closed door that allows some light to filter in. Following the light, Hanan al-Hashimy discovers her maid, Aliyah, in bed with her husband. This image, which represents the dissipation of the scent of cinnamon, recurs throughout the novel as a metaphor for the sexual interaction between the two female protagonists. Yazbek, then, begins to associate lesbianism with the scent of cinnamon.

The topic of sexual practices between same-sex partners is not new to Arabic

literature. Khaled El-Rouayheb demonstrates that pre-modern literary texts have addressed this issue, presenting homosexual practices without labeling them as a phenomenon of deviance driven by moral, social, or cultural degradation. In his critical book *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World:1500–1800* (2005), El-Rouayheb states:

> My central contention is that Arab-Islamic culture on the eve of modernity lacked the concept of "homosexuality," and that writings from the period do not evince the same attitude toward all aspects of what we might be inclined to call homosexuality today. (El-Rouayheb 2005, 1)

The novel portrays the protagonists' sexuality as one defined by their engagement in lesbian practices, which refer to the specific circumstances in which their desires are manifested. In this regard, Hanadi Al-Samman writes:"

> This fluidity in representing the wide range of human sexuality, on both the homoerotic and the heterosexual sides, will eventually be altered with the adoption of Victorian mores brought upon by the colonial experience in most of the Arab world. An overview of some of the medieval homoerotic literature will demonstrate that same-sex practices existed along heterosexual ones, and did not function as tropes for moral disintegration, political degeneration, and emasculation until the modern and the postmodern era in Arabic literature. (Al-Samman 2008, 274)

The applicability of the epistemological category of homosexuality in the Arab context has been subject to critique by Joseph Massad and Samar Habib. They argue that lesbianism, as a category developed in the West, specifically refers to a woman's sexual orientation and is used to define gender identity. However, it should be noted that Arabic speakers use signifiers that allude to the sexual activity rather than the sexual orientation that defines identity.

By featuring lesbian characters in an Arab setting, Samar Yazbek highlights the central role played by heterosexuality, patriarchy, heteropatriarchy, and the body. The story depicts women who are not only subject to a war waged against them to prove their

agency, but who also struggle against cultural and heteropatriarchal notions that limit their existence and enforce biased norms.

V.2   Heteropatriarchy and the Body in the Novel

Heterosexuality and patriarchy have long been interconnected within diverse societies and across historical periods. Patriarchy denotes a societal framework where men occupy primary positions of power and authority, spanning domains such as politics, economics, and familial structures. Within patriarchal systems, gender roles are established, granting men power and privilege while subordinating women. This persistent power imbalance has historically been sustained through a range of social institutions, legal frameworks, and cultural practices. Conversely, heterosexuality refers to the romantic and sexual attraction experienced between individuals who are not of the same sex. It serves as the prevalent sexual orientation and relationship model in a plethora of societies. Notably, in a patriarchal society, the norms and expectations surrounding heterosexuality are influenced by and contribute to the preservation of patriarchal power structures.

Yazbek's novel problematizes the subject's status within a governed society through various forms of repressive power related to heteropatriarchy. Male characters are depicted in the novel, embodying different models of masculinity, mostly from the point of view of the female characters. Kamden K. Strunk and Stephanie Hanane Sheldon, in their *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education* (2022), define heteropatriarchy as:

> The social, political, and economic system in which heterosexual men are the dominant group in a society or culture. The concept is made up of two parts: hetero, described as an inherent attraction to the opposite sex, and patriarchy, defined as systematic domination of men across a myriad of social institutions. Scholarship expands the framing of the concept to focus more broadly on the dominance of cisgender heterosexual men, 'since

what it is to be male varies across time and space'. (Strunk and Sheldon 2022, 256)

The conjunction of 'heterosexuality' and 'patriarchy' serves to challenge the centrality of gender assignments and hegemonic sexual practices within the system of patriarchal domination. This concept was first proposed by radical lesbian feminism, or lesbofeminism, as identified by Sheila Jeffreys in her book *The Lesbian Heresy* (1993). Lesbofeminism combines feminist principles with advocacy for lesbian visibility, equality, and rights. Lesbofeminists work to address the unique challenges faced by lesbian individuals within the broader context of gender and sexuality. Jeffreys argues:

> It is separation from the whole mindset of the heteropatriarchy
> that is necessary for the survival of any lesbian feminist challenge
> to male supremacy. (Jeffreys 1993, 160)

Given that heterosexuality is the foundation of patriarchy, the two concepts are inherently intertwined. Therefore, discussing heteropatriarchy requires a high degree of conceptual precision, since the use of the term "heteropatriarchy" entails an epistemological and political position. Specifically, this system creates unjust gender relations that generate and perpetuate oppression, violence, and discrimination.

Heteropatriarchy installs the body as the first territory of domination and, from that territory, mostly controls sexual practices and experiences. In his book *Patriarchy in Society and Religion* (2021), Tarcisius Mukuka contends:

> Patriarchy is the most pernicious ideology ever invented by
> men—I dare say it is humanity's original sin, *pace* Cardinal
> Wilfrid Napier—yet it is so widely accepted and revered as a
> male-gendered ideology that it is rarely open to challenge.
> (Mukuka 2021, 2)

Patriarchal ideology is deeply ingrained in cultures and operates through bodies, which serve as the primary materiality through which it circulates and reinforces power. Physicality is thus understood to have a sociocultural correlate, and gender assignment

forms the basis of relationships between men and women, thereby reinforcing the reproduction of heteronormative sex roles and a set of related inequalities that may intersect with other conditions, such as class status and ethnicity.

While patriarchy is rooted in the relationship between men and women, it involves a set of elements whose productive flows are based on the heteronormative construction of gender, gender identities, and heterosexuality. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues in his book *La domination masculine* (*Masculine Domination*) (1998):

> It is necessary to take note of and account for the social construction of the cognitive structures that organize the acts of construction of the world and its powers. And thus clearly see that this practical construction, far from being the conscious, free, deliberate intellectual act of an isolated 'subject', is itself the effect of a power, durably inscribed in the bodies of the dominated in the form of perception patterns and dispositions (to admire, to respect, to love, etc.) that make them sensitive to certain symbolic manifestations of power.[35] (Bourdieu 1998, 40-41)

The quote highlights the exercise of heteropatriarchal dominance and evinces that the production of desire confined to heterosexual binarism, which is subservient to male desire, circulates through a set of influencing subjective productions.

In her book *The Straight Mind* (1992), Monique Wittig identifies heterosexuality as a political system, and contends:

> I confront a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects, whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a way that affects their whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real. (Wittig 1992, 40-41)

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[35] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Il faut prendre acte et rendre compte de la construction sociale des structures cognitives qui organisent les actes de construction du monde et de ses pouvoirs. Et apercevoir ainsi clairement que cette construction pratique, loin d'être l'acte intellectuel conscient, libre, délibéré d'un 'sujet' isolé, est elle-même l'effet d'un pouvoir, inscrit durablement dans le corps des dominés sous la forme de schèmes de perception et de dispositions (à admirer, à respecter, à aimer, etc.) qui rendent sensible à certaines manifestations symboliques du pouvoir."

Wittig's definition is discussed by Mason Stokes and Donald E. Pease in their book *The Color of Sex* (2001), arguing:

> In Wittig's thinking, heterosexuality's power to promote its own invisibility is so complete that "the straight mind cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness, as well." Those "processes which escape consciousness" are the primary breeding ground for heterosexuality's normalizing and self-generating power. (Stokes and Pease 2001, 14)

Unlike Wittig, some feminists, such as Christine Delphy and Stevi Jackson, argue that it is the sexual division of labor and social gender relations that construct heterosexuality. They believe that abolishing the patriarchal system would solve discrimination against homosexuals. In this school of thought, heterosexuality is viewed as a sexual practice within the patriarchal system, and for these feminists, ending the system is key to ending heterosexuality.

Gender, heterosexuality, and patriarchy continuously intersect in *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*. Yazbek's representations do not provide any single homogeneous model of masculinity. The male characters are portrayed as suffering from the effects of repressive forces that stifle individuals in today's Syrian society, where political oppression and the patriarchal system work together to oppress both men and women. However, it would be incorrect to see the hegemonic model of masculinity as a natural outgrowth of the patriarchal system. In their article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt write:

> [...] we must distinguish between "patriarchy", the long-term structure of the subordination of women, and "gender", a specific system of exchange that arose in the context of modern capitalism. It is a mistake to treat a hierarchy of masculinities constructed within gender relations as logically continuous with the patriarchal subordination of women. […] It is a mistake to deduce relations among masculinities from the direct exercise of personal power by men over women. At the least, we also must factor in the institutionalization of gender inequalities, the role of

cultural constructions, and the interplay of gender dynamics with race, class, and religion. (Connel and Messerschmidt 2005, 839)

The novel centers around the inner world of Aliyah and Hanan, with their experiences and perspectives being given prominence over the male characters'. While men are present and play a role in the story, they are not the focus of an in-depth psychological investigation. Rather, they are depicted as examples of clichéd gender roles that are seen through the lens of a predominantly female perspective. This representation highlights the gendered power dynamics at play in the society and culture depicted in the novel. By emphasizing the experiences and voices of women, Yazbek challenges the traditional patriarchal system that has long dominated the literary canon.

In the context of the traditional family, the representation of masculinity serves to represent subordinate femininity. In her book *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967* (2009), Samira Aghacy argues:

> The rhetoric of masculinity and femininity has long been reified in various Arab cultural and literary productions and seen in binary opposition where biological differences are fixed, natural, absolute, and unequivocal, based upon congenital ineluctability. Unlike woman who is anchored in biology, man transcends his physiological reality and is defined in terms of a universalist abstraction. (Aghacy 2009, 1)

In her study, Samira Aghacy addresses the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which is often embodied by the men portrayed by Samar Yazbek. The hegemonic masculinity proposed by R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt is based on the concept of cultural hegemony theorized by Antonio Gramsci. It thus corresponds to the standard by which men define their own masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt also note:

> Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices – including physical violence – that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting. (Connell and Messerschmidt

2005, 840)

Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah portrays the conventional gender roles and expectations placed upon women in the context of the family and society. Women are often expected to embody a specific set of feminine qualities, as seen through Hanan's mother's attempts to teach her how to behave in the bedroom with her husband. This ideal of femininity requires women to constantly cater to their husbands' desires, spoil them, and even pretend to sexually reject them to spark their arousal. In outside settings, women are expected to be submissive and hide their feelings, leaving little room for their own desires and emotions. This traditional gendered division of labor places men in a position of power where they can control and dominate women, perpetuating a patriarchal system where women's desires and feelings are often ignored or dismissed. The novel highlights the oppressive nature of these gender roles and calls for a critical examination of societal expectations placed upon women in both private and public spheres.

Samar Yazbek identifies two types of masculinity based on two characters in her novel. These characters are Aliyah's father and Hanan's husband, whose name is Anwar. The former comes from a low-income family and deliberately adopts the orthodox social paradigm of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by domineering, dictatorial behavior, and aggression towards the wife and children. In this context, hegemony refers to the use of aggression and dominance towards the other, embodied by the female character. In contrast, Hanan's husband hails from a devout Muslim middle-class background and passively accepts, rather than actively embodies, the patriarchal concept of hegemonic masculinity. He does not resort to physical violence against his wife but still exercises control over her by coercing her into having sex despite her discomfort.

The body, particularly within the dimension of sexuality, often reveals the power dynamics inherent in heterosexual relationships. Individuals are generally divided into

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those who are subjected to domination and those who exert it. The worlds of women and

men are clearly demarcated, and no opportunity for meaningful connection between the

two is considered. In *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*, Samar Yazbek writes:

> Between their two bodies lay that of the husband, alone, humiliated by his own nakedness; a sight unfamiliar to Hanan. She had spent the whole of their time together believing that he was devoid of any particularities. Even when he was on top of her she felt no pleasure as a woman might in feeling the weight of a man's body on her own; there was nothing more than a heaviness.[36] (Yazbek 2012, 9)

The story is narrated from Hanan's perspective, who is shocked to witness her young

girlfriend pleasuring her husband. Parts of the story center around Anwar's passive role

as a mere body sandwiched between two women. Hanan further emasculates Anwar by

describing his penis as a limp, insignificant appendage. The male body, according to

Hanan, does not symbolize masculinity, but rather is a site of impotence and loss. It is

important to note that the above quote is replete with instances that reflect Anwar's

emasculation, such as Hanan's perception of his weight.

This excerpt from the novel is vital in that it illustrates how the logic of control

governs passionate relationships. The most ardent relationship depicted in the novel is

between Hanan and Aliyah. Through her sexual encounter with Hanan, Aliyah is

awakened to the realization that she owns Hanan's body, which can serve as a source of

power. By harnessing this power, Aliyah can free herself from being an object possessed

by others and transform herself into a seductress. She chooses to employ the power of her

body not only in her relationship with her lover but also in her dealings with her husband.

Yazbek delineates how Aliyah's relationship with Anwar is driven solely by desire and

how she must transition from a submissive position to a position of power. The oscillation

that Aliyah displays is highly indicative of her fluid sexual orientation. In her book *Sexual*

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[36] The original Arabic version of the novel was published in Beirut by Dar Al-Adab.

Fluidity (2008), Lisa M. Diamond gives a precise definition of the concept:

> Sexual fluidity, quite simply, means situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness. This flexibility makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation. (Diamond 2008, 3)

In the novel, Anwar's body is occasionally likened to that of an animal. Hanan recollects their passionate encounters after Aliyah's departure, but those fond memories are abruptly supplanted by the traumatic recollections of their first wedding night. Hanan employs the metaphor of a crocodile to articulate her repulsion and disdain towards her husband's body in an internal monologue:

> Do you know what crocodiles are like? They have thick, dangling penises and their smell is like death. Have you seen the face of my old crocodile? You've seen him? But you haven't smelt him. That smell, it's not old age. He's always smelt like that. Then and now. Do you know what it's like to lie beneath an old crocodile – a foaming, drooling, panting crocodile? I had to do it all the time... I would be lying beneath his flesh, in this terrifying place where there's nothing but shadow – between the crocodile's skin and the sound of his breathing. (Yazbek 2012, 43)

Hanan evokes a succession of images that represent her bond with Anwar. Throughout the novel, masculinity is consistently depicted from the perspective of female characters. In this context, the fragmentation of the human body assumes a gendered significance and is transformed through a process of animalization. Since sex-specific interactions are not grounded in free will, the female partner is deprived of the opportunity to establish a genuine verbal connection with her male counterpart.

The portrayal of Hanan's sexual relationship with her husband exhibits features that are diametrically opposed to her experiences with her maid. For Hanan, the husband is a pitiable creature, and the image of a crocodile is accompanied by several repugnant qualities, such as the secretion of fluids, semen/foam, and saliva, which all serve to further estrange him from the human realm. This description intersects with Julia Kristeva's

notion of abjection.

In her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva characterizes the abject as the reaction to an imminent loss of meaning following the inability to differentiate between the subject and object. This reference to Kristeva is corroborated by Emily Kelley in her book *Binding the Absent Body in Medieval and Modern Art* (2019), where she asserts:

> Kristeva's theory of abjection refers to a person's reaction of repulsion or rejection to anything that disrupts the underlying rules of social order. The abject exists within the liminal space between the subject, or "I," and the object, which usually are the forbidden or unmentioned elements of the self. According to Kristeva, being forced to contemplate the abject is traumatic but also inherently intriguing. There is always a level of fascination with the abject, even though it is to be rejected. (Kelley 2019, 33)

The primary example of what triggers such a reaction is the corpse. Kristeva further describes the abject by saying that "it is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object"[37] (Kristeva 1980, 4). Hanan regards her husband with disgust. The use of expressions such as "secretion of fluids," "foam" and "saliva"evokes an intense sense of distaste. This feeling, which Hanan cannot bear, prevents her not only from seeing him as a sexual partner but also as a human being. This concept aligns with the views of Moya Lloyd, as articulated in her book *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (2013), where she references Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler by stating:

> Kristeva utilizes abjection to refer to the process of jettisoning or radically excluding what is unclean, repulsive and improper in order for the speaking subject – and the symbolic – to exist […] As Butler uses it, the term 'abject' refers to those populations who are currently denied subject status populations 'whose living under the sign of the "unlivable"', according to Butler, 'is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.' (Lloyd 2013, 74)

The feeling of disgust affects almost all Hanan's senses. For instance, sight is

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[37] The book was originally written in French and translated into English by Leon S. Roudiez. The English version was published in New York by Columbia University Press.

affected through the image of the animal and its swinging limbs; hearing is affected by the sound of her husband's breathing; touch is affected through the feel of human skin and weight; and smell plays a central role here, as it does throughout the rest of the novel. Hanan compares her husband's smell to that of the dead and realizes that it is not a smell caused by old age, but rather his smell from day one. Anwar is always depicted lying supine on the bed in his bedroom and never taking part in the action, confining himself to submitting to the maid's seduction: he is practically dead.

The other face of masculinity is embodied by Aliyah's father: the dominant man molded on the model of patriarchal society. Yazbek writes:

> Aliyah's father was a dark, strangely attractive man. His skin was a golden, coffee colour and his voice deep and gruff. All of the women in the neighbourhood envied his wife, even more so after one unfortunate night when he had come out of the house and displayed his equipment for all of them to see. 'It's so big, it needs four women!' they teased Aliyah's mother after that. (Yazbek 2012, 30)

The distinction between Anwar and Aliyah's father is evident and is reflected in the depiction of his equipment, that is the penis. While Hanan's husband can be recognized by a phallus hanging down like a cloth, Aliyah's father is endowed with a large organ that requires, by women's reckoning, the satisfaction of four women. He is recognized by his community, represented here by women staring at his penis, as a man who embodies the ideals of masculinity conforming to the patriarchal society's norms.

Aliyah's father is shaped by the violence he uses against his wife and children. He does not work and is content with his wife's meager salary, which is barely enough to make the family's ends meet. In the novel, Yazbek describes him thus:

> He would wake her up in the middle of the night, when her strength was spent from the day's work, and pull her out of bed, anxious not to wake the children. In the beginning, he would screw her just next to the bed, but then his daughters – Aliyah the biggest gossip of them all – began telling the neighbourhood women about what their father got up to at night. After that he became

> more cautious, dragging his semi-conscious wife into the
> bathroom – the space which doubled as a kitchen and was barely
> wide enough for two to stand. He would make her kneel, then
> mount her for a few minutes, before withdrawing quickly. At first,
> Aliyah's mother would cry, but once she got used to his behaviour
> andher movements became automatic, he no longer had to ask.
> She would take off her clothes and lay still beneath him and when
> he had finished,she would wash quickly, without looking him in
> the face. Afterwards she would return hastily to bed where she
> plunged into a deep sleep. (ibid, 30-31)

The model of masculinity embodied by Aliyah's father is built exclusively on the dimension of violence. The male body, which appears here only through violent acts, is governed by the will to dominate. The only legitimate position for a man is one of superiority over a woman, and the female body is viewed only as a tool for the gratification of male desires.

In the novel, heterosexual relationships are consistently characterized by violence and domination. Masculinity is established through the exploitation of the feminine other, and femininity is constructed through submission to male desire. Masculinity and femininity are therefore products of a power network organized around sexuality and unequal access to pleasure. In her article "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method," Catharine A. MacKinnon writes about the status of pleasure in patriarchal contexts:

> Masculinity precedes male as femininity precedes female and
> male sexual desire defines both. Specifically, "woman" is defined
> by what male desire requires for arousal and satisfaction with
> "female sexuality"and "the female sex". In the permissible ways
> a woman can be treated,the ways that are socially considered not
> violations, but appropriate to her nature, one finds the particulars
> of male sexual interests and requirements. (MacKinnon 1989,
> 318-319)

In this context, heterosexual relationships are products of a society structured by a hierarchical gender system that precludes the possibility of genuine connection. The dynamics of domination and subordination transcend societal boundaries. Aliyah's father, for example, embodies the traditional and patriarchal model of masculinity within his

impoverished community, while her wealthy husband passively conforms to these norms.

In the novel, the smell is the main stimulus of memory. Cinnamon is a widely used natural spice found in many foods, with medicinal properties valued for its high levels of antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents that help protect the body against various diseases. Cinnamon has a notable medicinal application as an aphrodisiac. In her book *Drink to Your Health* (2000), Hanane Mclntyre states: "In medieval Europe cinnamon was highly recommended as an aphrodisiac, as well as a remedy for coughs and sore throats" (Mclntyre 2000, 30). Cinnamon also has sexually stimulating benefits. In *The Essential Oils Complete Reference Guide* (2017), KG Stiles writes:

> Cinnamon leaf also has powerful aphrodisiac properties that are helpful for recovery after physical exhaustion and help build strength and stamina. Its warming and stimulating properties may be helpful for overcoming sexual impotence and relieving symptoms of frigidity. (Stiles 2017, 167)

The character of Hanan undergoes a transformative journey driven by her exploration of the erotic dimension, punctuated by the presence of various scents. Of particular relevance is the aroma of cinnamon, which marks a pivotal element of her sexual memories. Hanan first encounters this fragrance during the preparation of a neighbor's daughter, through a bridal shower, in the segregated environs of a *hammam* (حمام) (public bathhouse).

The *hammam*, here adorned with white marble, serves as a setting where women from the upper class engage in body scrubbing using aromatic soaps and indulge in massages with oils and herbs. This space is characterized by its association with captivating visuals, alluring scents, and an atmosphere that is both soothing and enchanting. Throughout the novel, these associations with the white color and fragrances, particularly the delightful scent of cinnamon, persistently reappear whenever there is a depiction of a lesbian encounter or the emergence of lesbian desires.

The fact that Hanan's initial erotic experience with another woman occurs within this context of strict gender separation is noteworthy:

> Once they had skirted the length of the stone wall, the wide square appeared before them, filled with orange trees, rose bushes and jasmine, the scents transforming the city evenings into a perfumed dream which cloaked the ugliness. As her nose recollected the fragrance, Hanan's memory of her first visit to the women's bathhouse came back to her. It was the wedding day of the neighbour's daughter. (Yazbek 2012, 66)

Space is bounded not just by visual and auditory stimuli but also by the sense of smell. Still unaware of her body and sexuality, Hanan experiences a kind of ecstatic rapture that is tinged with fear. Her encounter with another woman is characterized by ambiguity, and as a little girl, she lacks the tools needed to understand what is happening. The relationship is asymmetrical, and in a way, Hanan is just a puppet in the hands of the other woman who exerts dominance over her. This notion of dominance marks Hanan's first real erotic experience with an upper-class woman from Damascus. From the beginning, Hanan and her husband lead separate lives. Anwar is preoccupied with his work while Hanan starts attending private parties organized by wealthy women, only for women.

The *hammam* is dedicated to the erotic games between Hanan and Aliyah. Like other relationships between women in the novel, their relationship never takes place in public. This is where Aliyah is initiated into the erotic universe, an initiation that is tinged with cinnamon:

> One evening the mistress requested a cup of cinnamon tea. When Aliyah took it to her she found her in the bathtub. The mistress ordered Aliyah to take off her clothes and come closer to help. Then she pulled her into the water, biting her neck until the salty taste touched her tongue. Aliyah was stunned – like a mouse suddenly confronted by a cat – as the mistress continued to kiss her. She was frozen to the spot. The mistress started to kiss the girl's fingers, then she led them wandering to the secret places of her body. (ibid, 73)

Aliyah associates the scent of cinnamon with the universe of female lust. The passage

blends elements of power and physicality, highlighting the dialectic between love and domination that runs through the entire story. This combination is present in relationships between both men and women and organizes interactions between women as well. The fact that Aliyah is a young girl who employs lesbianism as a means to challenge the social and cultural norms of sexuality imposed by heteropatriarchal society may prompt us to assign her the label 'LUG.' In the realm of queer sexuality, 'LUG' refers to a woman of high school or college age who is exploring or temporarily embracing a lesbian or bisexual identity.

The female protagonists in the novel are unable to escape the dominant logic of heterosexual relationships. Masculinity and femininity are constructed within a distribution paradigm in which the man is only recognized as such when he dominates the woman, who is inevitably expected to comply with the socially accepted model of femininity. Similarly, political power is gendered, with regime politics embodying the patriarchal model of masculinity that violates and dominates, while those subjected to that power are feminized by their servile acceptance of domination.

V.3   Arab Lesbians: Longing and Belonging

Samar Yazbek's *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah* primarily focuses on female homosexual relationships in Syrian society. In so doing, the author not only affirms the presence of lesbian characters in Arabic literature but also amplifies the voices of those who express their desires and fears in Arabic novels. This representation of lesbian existence is often associated with a search for identity, a sense of identification with the concept of 'lesbianity.' In his book *Trauma, Violence, and Lesbian Agency in Croatia and Serbia* (2020), Bojan Bilic argues:

> Feminists consider *lesbianity* a feminist issue because a *lesbian* is
> above all a woman and think that the right to choosing a lifestyle
> and a partner is one of the fundamental women's rights that the

women's movement is fighting for. (Bilic 2020, 45)

Bilic's discussion centers on the telos of nearly every author and activist fighting for women's and lesbian rights, which is invariably linked to the heteropatriarchal obligations imposed upon the female subject. In their book *The Personal of the Political* (2015), Marek M. Wojtaszek, Elzbieta H. Oleksy and Aleksandra M. Rozalska argue:

> Because of the specific double exclusion of a non-heterosexual woman—first, by virtue of her womanhood and, second, due to her rejection of male desire, to which she is allegedly destined— a separate emancipatory space for her should be an obvious objective. As it is now, however, neither language nor social practices encompass lesbianity and the situation of lesbian- identified women. We do not have our own space, initiatives, organizations or, at least—although I am not much of a supporter here—a leader. In fact, no single discourse embraces us, let alone the plurality of narratives. This is contrary to what gay men can enjoy. (Wojtaszek, Oleksy and Rozalska 2015, 225)

This quote, mainly about European society, can also be relevant to Syrian and Middle Eastern societies. Women, regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds, are subjected to the same forms of oppression. Heteropatriarchal dominance is a universal ideology that operates beyond territorial, cultural, and social boundaries.

The heteropatriarchal society's view of lesbians remains complex. A lesbian subject always rejects the identity imposed by society. This idea is dismantled in Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin's book *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (1993) in which they argue: "[l]esbians, unlike heteropatriarchal theorists who strive to produce a consensus reality, do not accept a single definition of Lesbian identity" (Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993, 187). The question of whether lesbians should be considered women has been the subject of a heated debate. Monique Wittig and other scholars argue against including lesbianism within the category of womanhood. In her book *Feminist Social Thought* (2014), Diana Tietjens Meyers writes:

> The lesbian objection to being a woman is not met by admissions that the category "woman" as well as what it means to be anatomically female are open to social construction and reconstruction. Nor is it met by the suggestion that there is no single category "woman" but instead multiple categories of women. From a lesbian perspective, what has to be challenged is heterosexual society's demand that females be women. For that demand denies the lesbian option. The lesbian option is to be a not-woman, where being a not-woman is played out by insisting on being neither identifiably woman nor man, nor by enacting femininity as drag, nor by insisting on switching gender categories and thus being a man, which within patriarchy means being dominant in relation to women and potentially also misogynistic.[38] (Meyers 2014, 207)

Through her portrayal of lesbianism, Samar Yazbek depicts the challenges that lesbians face when accepting their sexuality in a society that condemns, stigmatizes, marginalizes, and fails to comprehend them. Yazbek's writing is deeply influenced by political and social events, and her novel explores complex issues such as sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and performance. Yazbek addresses these questions in the context of previous studies on homosexuality and the development, formulation, and reformulation of these concepts.

In lesbian Arabic literature, a question of ontological order plagues the characters that populate novels discussing female homosexuality: what does it mean to be an Arab lesbian? Homosexuality is often portrayed in Arabic literature as a trend, disorder, anomaly, or perversion. The lesbian characters in these novels search for an explanation, a definition, and a model with which they can identify. Due to the lack of satisfying answers and the inability to construct a stable model of identity, these characters experience fluctuating feelings of fear and inadequacy.

The novel initially portrays the protagonists as heterosexual, but they adopt a lesbian label in response to patriarchal oppression as a way to assert their feminine and

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[38] The first edition of the book was published in 1997.

sexual identities. Throughout the novel, they face external and internal pressures and become embroiled in multiple love disputes. These characters must confront obstacles that challenge and question their homosexual desires, attempting to force them to conform to the heteropatriarchal system they are trying to escape. Despite this predicament, they manage to assume their homosexuality with minimal suffering and anguish. The reason for their defiance of the heteropatriarchal system is discussed in *Feminist Theory and the Classics* where Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin contend:

> Contemporary Lesbian scholars address the question, "Who is a Lesbian?" in provocative and creative ways. Lesbian identity is not limited to or defined by affectional orientation, although that orientationand all it implies are basic to contemporary Lesbian identity: being a Lesbian is a way of being-in-the-world that defies all assumptions of the heteropatriarchy. (Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993, 187)

It is common for Yazbek's lesbian characters to feel stigmatized and disaffected, while also attempting to connect with others going through similar situations for better understanding. These characters discuss the process of natural and spontaneous identification that allows them to recognize one another, implying the existence of something these individuals have in common. Therefore, it is seminal to emphasize the importance of this perspective of the Other in the formation of identity, as Homi Bhabha discusses in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

> The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pregiven identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be for an other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. (Bhabha 1994, 64)

The ability to recognize oneself in the eyes of the other leads us to the idea of "gaydar," which precisely denotes a person's ability to discover another person's sexual orientation without having to comment on the subject. In her article "Gaydar: Eye-gaze as Identity Recognition among Gay Men and Lesbians," Cheryl L. Nicholas states:

> Eye-gaze is argued to be crucial to forces that either trigger or reinforce one gay person's perception of another person's gay identity during social encounters. "Gaydar" is the folk concept used within the gay and lesbian culture to name this identity recognition device [...] Originating as a pun borrowed from the term "radar," the tag Gaydar suggests that members of the gay and lesbian culture along with straight people familiar1 with gay/lesbian culture have an innate remote detector that picks up the behavior of individuals within a specified range. (Nicholas 2004, 60)

Regardless of an individual's preference, sexual orientation is likely to be felt among those who share the same orientation. *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*'s focus is on characters who either do not publicly admit their homosexuality or prefer to keep it hidden for a period of time. In this way, there exists a subtle and effective communication between characters, usually through gazing, which is a form of recognition prior to the sexual encounter and which allows for the formation of relationships, complicity, and mutual understanding. This pre-lesbian encounter is clearly described by Samar Yazbek:

> Aliyah was afraid of Hanan. She felt alarmed as Hanan calmly investigated her body. Hanan's fingers played over the little body moving them over her eyes like a pianist. She twisted the girl's hands and looked lustfully at her fingers. The little girl didn't understand much of what her mistress was saying; she was completely overwhelmed upon finding herself in this magic realm. Aliyah never concentrated much during those long sessions in the bathroom, as she spread oil and foamy soap over her mistress's body, in accordance with her instructions. (Yazbek 2012, 42).

In a socio-historical context where coming out as homosexual could lead to various forms of retribution, there is an urgent need to hide from those who are considered normal. In Yazbek's novel, however, there is a tension between the desire to conceal one's identity and the need for a sense of group belonging. Yazbek shows that the lesbian character is the one who comes to terms with her sexuality more easily and, after a process of self-discovery, becomes able to accept herself. Being open about their sexual orientation is a moment of liberation and self-condemnation for both Aliyah and Hanan.

When confronted with theories that attribute homosexuality to psychological trauma or inadequate upbringing, Aliyah rebels and expresses her final cry of independence. The characters are often faced with misunderstandings from others and speeches that attempt to invalidate their desires. Scientific, medical, and psychoanalytic discourse, in general, fails to provide the answers that they seek. Despite this, the novel contains numerous allusions, indicating Yazbek's authentic interest in psychoanalytic studies, even though her comprehension may seem more surface-level than in-depth.

Part of the characters' struggle stems from rejecting the masculine presence that does not suit them. They feel doubly excluded because, first, their sexual orientation eludes heteronormativity, and second, they do not conform to the typical behavior of the group with which they should identify. Samar Yazbek deals with important aspects of an individual's identity construction, which are now referred to as sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (this also reminds us of the concept of performativity, as adopted by Judith Butler).

Yazbek's protagonists express themselves as lesbians according to the conventions associated with heterosexual female characters, but this also highlights their lack of understanding towards individuals who express themselves ambivalently or do not conform to traditional gender categories associated with their biological sex.

In *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*, Samar Yazbek repeatedly raises the question of what it means to be a female homosexual in an Arab heteronormative society. Her work is commendable for initiating discussions on human sexuality and depicting a unique form of desire, human drama, and conflict in a time when such topics are scarce in Arabic literature. Although the protagonists refuse to express themselves in any other genre, Yazbek's novel has given visibility and representation to different types of lesbians.

VI. Queering Moroccan Masculinity in Abdellah Taïa's *An Arab Melancholia*

An Arab Melancholia is a novel written by Abdellah Taïa in 2008 under the French title *Une mélancolie arabe* and translated into English by Frank Stock in 2012. The novel builds on the autobiography of the author, who comes from a poor Moroccan family and is guided by his homosexuality to travel and pursue an artistic career. Taïa describes the courageous story of a young Arab man who accepts his homosexuality without denying his origins and religion.

The novel portrays the emergence of a queer Moroccan identity, highlighting the author's emphasis on dismantling traditional Moroccan cultural influences. My examination delves into the formation of queer Moroccan masculinity. According to Taïa, the affirmation of queer masculinity necessitates the deconstruction of both patriarchy and heteronormativity, which unjustly dominate and overshadow queer sexuality.

VI.1   Taïa's Migration and the Reception of the Novel

Abdellah Taïa is a Francophone Moroccan writer who was born in 1973 in Sale, a Moroccan city neighboring Rabat. His writings on homosexuality have generated a range of reactions from both supporters and opponents, particularly given the contentious nature of the topic in Morocco. His direct and explicit discussion of his own homosexuality and his views on the issue position it as a matter of individual freedom and choice that should not be suppressed. Taïa wrote several novels in French including *Mon Maroc* (2000) (*My Morocco*), *Le Rouge du tarbouche* (2004) (*The Red of the Fez*), *L'Armée du salut* (2006) (*Salvation Army*), *Le jour de roi* (2010) (*The King's Day*), *Un*

pays pour mourir (2015) (*A Country for Dying*), *La vie lente* (2019) (*The Slow Life*) and *Vivre à ta lumière* (2022) (*Living in your Light*).

Abdellah Taïa is the first Moroccan writer to declare his homosexuality in an interview with the liberal Moroccan political magazine *Tel Quel* in 2006. In her book *Writing Queer Identities in Morocco* (2021), Tina Dransfeldt Christensen speaks comprehensively and exclusively about Taïa's life, homosexuality and literary contribution. She mentions his interview with *Tel Quel* and writes: "[t]his interview became a turning point in Taïa's life and career, because at that moment he decided to come out publicly" (Christensen 2021, ix). Christensen explains that Taïa has been confined to this image of the first Moroccan author to come out publicly and that there is more to explore in his novels and writing. In *Abdellah Taïa*, *la mélancolie et le cri* (*Abdellah Taïa, Melancholy and the Shout*) (2021), Jean-Pierre Boulé argues that "this first coming out in French was ignored by his family and (former) friends, who put it down to youth" (Boulé 2020, 14),[39] an idea that was raised by French journalist and author Guy Hocquenghem in his book *Le désire homosexuel* (*Homosexual Desire*) (1972), stating: "From childhood, homosexual desire is socially eliminated through a series of family and educational mechanisms" (Hocquenghem 1972, 23).[40] In the case of Taïa, the only person who did not ignore him was his mother. In February 2016, Spanish-born, UK-based author and specialist in queer Muslim issues Alberto Fernández Carbajal conducted an interview with Taïa in the form of an article entitled "The wanderings of a gay Moroccan: An interview with Abdellah Taïa." In the interview, Taïa explains how

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[39] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Ce premier *coming out* en français fut ignoré par sa famille et ses (anciens) amis, qui mirent ce geste sur le compte de la jeunesse."

[40] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Dès l'enfance, le désir homosexuel est éliminé socialement par une série de mécanismes familiaux et éducatifs."

his mother supported him when he first came out as gay and how it was impossible for

him to call his siblings and tell them he was "gay." He says:

> […] my mother kept in touch, and she never disowned me. She
> always told my sisters I was the child that gave her the least
> trouble, except perhaps for being gay. (Carbajal 2017, 496)

Being gay was shocking to Taïa's family, friends and mother, but his mother would never

leave him in the lurch only because of his queer sexual orientation, even though she did

not seem to accept it as a Moroccan, Muslim woman.

Taïa's mother's tolerance of his homosexuality lies in her objection to the

patriarchal norms that Moroccan society uses to systematically disadvantage women in

favor of men. She believes that her son's disclosure of his sexual orientation serves as a

transformative act that challenges and undermines the established, inflexible principles

of masculinity that Morocco has long perpetuated. Consequently, this act of disclosure

becomes a form of resistance against heteropatriarchy, a social structure that consigns

women to subordinate roles and oppresses men who identify as non-heterosexual.

The fact that Taïa came out and declared his sexual orientation publicly is not a

recurring incident in Morocco and the Arab world. As a rule, Arab authors are more

inclined to use the lexical and stylistic methods to write what is commonly known as

autofiction, where there is a fusion of the author's own life and the fictional plot they are

writing, or as French author Chloé Delaume describes it in her essay *La règle du je* (*The

Rule of the I*) (2010): "Autofiction means trusting language much more than memory or

oneself" (Delaume 2010, 20).[41] In this way, Arab authors delve deep into taboo and

controversial issues, yet steer clear of direct exposure to accusations of homosexuality.

In contrast, Taïa had the courage to proclaim his sexual orientation despite being aware

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[41] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Autofiction: se fier au langage bien plus qu'à la mémoire et bien plus qu'à soi-même." More on 'autofiction' in the next section.

of the harsh and intense ostracism he would later confront. In "Breaking the Silence," Tina Dransfeldt Christensen claims that Taïa's status as an author and activist made him face the risk of becoming a "token Arab homosexual" (Christensen 2017, 107).

Indeed, Taïa's exceptionalism in openly disclosing his homosexuality is consequently related to the type of education and environment to which he was exposed. This is asserted in Denis M. Provencher's and Siham Bouamer's book *Abdellah Taïa's Queer Migrations* (2021):

> Indeed, it was his "queer migration" to Geneva in 1998 and Paris in 1999 where he began to pursue his dreams. This has led, however, to an overly rehearsed interpretation, in the scholarship at times, of Taïa's path to Europe as a migration of a gay man and a modern influence by Western values of urban life, commercialism, conspicuous consumption, "pride," and liberation, and reverse sexual tourism. (Provencher and Bouamer 2021, 1)

Taïa's exposure to Western culture and values played a pivotal role in his writings, lectures, and self-description. He could never have announced his homosexual orientation if he had not adjusted to Western life. Speaking of which, acculturation rather than assimilation led him to embrace the Western individualistic mindset, leading to his valiant coming out as a homosexual public figure in a country where the war on homosexuals has never come to a halt. By considering that Taïa's adoption of Western values is a kind of acculturation, I claim that he has not completely discarded his Moroccan cultural values and roots; rather, the cultural and social side of the West that prompted him to leave Morocco was the freedom to be sexually what one feels and chooses, not what society dictates. With regard to identity, Taïa's nationalistic and cultural affiliations with France or Switzerland were not comparable to his attachment to Morocco, his homeland.

Denis M. Provencher and Siham Bouamer refer to the French author Jean-Pierre Boulé whose 2020 book *Abdellah Taïa*, *la mélancolie et le cri* (*Abdellah Taïa, Melancholy and the Shout*) is "the first book-length study of Taïa's work in French, with

an emphasis on the themes of melancholia, mourning, nostalgia, and reparation among others" (ibid, 2). Boulé's analysis casts light upon the dynamics between Taïa and Switzerland and France, unveiling his profound yearning for a sense of belonging and the preservation of his cultural ties to Morocco. This exploration highlights the complexities inherent in the relationship, as Taïa navigates his identity within the context of his host countries while maintaining a deep connection to his homeland. Boulé's examination makes clear the deep-seated desire to reconcile the tensions between assimilation and cultural heritage, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay of identity and belonging.

When Taïa left for Europe, his expectations were replete with hopes of sexual freedom and peaceful sexual life. However, what was, I can venture, "shocking" was the fact that whatever hopes Taïa had harbored were illusory. The France he encountered was not the France he had read and learned about. Being part of the queer community would probably be treated kindly in France. However, the fact that Abdellah Taïa, in addition to his homosexuality, was a migrant from an Arab and African country caused the French to treat him with racism. This notion is criticized by Roderick Ferguson in his book *One-Dimensional Queer* (2018), in which he argues that the one-dimensional queer legacy has promoted forms of exclusion and marginalization against queer subjects who are seen as Others by white supremacists (Ferguson 2018, 1).

In his seminal book *Queer Maghrebi French* (2017), Denis M. Provencher speaks about non-heterosexual Maghrebi subjects living in France, of whom Taïa is one, and claims:

> Queer Maghrebi French voices and faces remain largely absent from a variety of real-life and representational spaces in contemporary France and beyond. (Provencher 2017, 10)

In *Abdellah Taïa's Queer Migrations* (2021), Provencher and Bouamer discuss Taïa's reception on French territory, stating:

> Taïa may very well have become an intellectual living in Paris, however, twenty-first century France remains largely unsympathetic to communities of difference, that is, queer, Muslim, or otherwise. (Provencher and Bouamer 2021, 3)

In his book *Contested Borders* (2022), William J. Spurlin discusses Taïa's situation when he first arrived in France:

> Abdellah Taïa, after moving to Paris, meets Javier on a film set in Morocco, but rather than being seen as a potential partner of equal status in contradiction to the rigidity of the active/passive binary assumed to structure sexual relations between Arab Muslim men in Morocco, which he nonetheless tried to challenge when he was younger and living there through rejecting the passive sexual role as an emasculation, Abdellah experiences objectification, in this case, from the white gaze, for his *racial* difference. In *Une mélancolie arabe*, Abdellah seems very much aware of the image being created of himself as 'un jeune terroriste marocain et musulman' [a young Moroccan and Muslim terrorist] (40) as a result of postcolonial and post-immigration conditions in France via the gaze of Javier when they meet for the first time. (Spurlin 2022, 192)

Despite the racist conditions which he underwent upon his arrival in France, Taïa's migration from Morocco is proof of his deep desire to embark on a path that leads to an overt and unconcealed exploration of his sexuality. He emigrated within Morocco, then migrated to Switzerland and then to France. This continual cycle of displacement renders him "un 'homme dépaysé' [man out of place, literally 'out of his country']" (ibid, 4).

I can argue that aside from writing in French to appeal to Arab and Western readers, Taïa's use of French is indicative of metropolitan characteristics and western values regarding individual liberties and philosophies of life, to which he is attached and which, to some extent, give him space to write and express his thoughts without being vehemently criticized. Moreover, Frédéric Lagrange, in "Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature," argues that French-speaking Maghrebian authors dealing with

homosexuality played a central role in the flourishing of psychoanalytic studies of Arab societies (Lagrange 2000, 170). Khalid Zekri, in "Littérature marocaine et transgression de l'hétéronormativité" (Moroccan Literature and the Transgression of Heteronormativity) also argues that Abdellah Taïa contributes to a remarkable renewal of homosexuality in Maghrebian literature (Zekri 2008, 168). In *Writing Queer Identities in Morocco* (2021), Tina Dransfeldt Christensen historicizes different periods in writing about queerness in Morocco and writes:

> […] Although writing about homosexuality as an identity category is arelatively recent phenomenon in Moroccan literature, writing about queer desire and narrating queer subject positions is not. Moroccan literature has since the 1950s focused on queer identities that areperformed and contested on the thresholds of nations, languages and sexualities. (Christensen 2021, 1)

Speaking of Moroccan authors writing in French – such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Driss Chraïbi and Leïla Slimani – Dieu Hack-Polay, Ali B. Mahmoud, Agnieszka Rydzik, in their book *Migration Practice as Creative Practice* (2021) affirmatively discuss the use of French language in Taïa's novels, stating:

> The relation with a language can be attributed to dynamics of power and identity and their [Moroccan writers writing in French] desire to engage with French was complementary to their years in France whereas the motive for younger writers like Taïa to continue living in France is orthodox state policies like illegality of homosexuality. (Hack-Polay, Mahmoud and Rydzik 2021, 209)

The excitement that the *Tel Quel* interview triggered was correspondingly rapturous. The French-speaking magazine readers were initially surprised, but when Taïa repeated his statements in some Arabic-language newspapers in Morocco, such as *Al Massae*, a storm of indignation broke out. He is believed to bring out his homosexuality only to curry favor with the West.[42] After the interview, Taïa was accused of causing so

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[42] For more on the *Tel Quel* interview with Taïa, see https://telquel.ma/2021/11/12/il-y-a-15-ans-quand-abdellah-Taïa-faisait-son-coming-out-dans-nos-colonnes_1742972. Accessed on 04 July 2022.

much damage to Morocco and Islam that he should be burned alive. Jean-Pierre Boulé

documents the tantrum that followed the interview and explains:

> Karim Boukhari summarizes the reactions that followed upon
> Taïa's statement: generally, they revolved around homophobic
> insults. According to Boukhari, *Al Massae*, the most widely
> circulated daily newspaper in Morocco at the time, proposed
> burning the writer alive. *Al Massae* also criticized the second
> national television channel for putting him on screen. The same
> tone of voice was heard in *Attajdid*, the unofficial daily of the
> Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). (Boulé 2020,
> 14)[43]

Abdellah Taïa's strong and passionate allegiance to Morocco is hampered by the

country's merciless attitude towards all subjects whose sexuality does not align with

heteronormativity. Despite the harsh criticism he received, Taïa felt compelled to

demonstrate his deep attachment to Morocco. His only obstacle was living therein and

cultivating his homosexuality without being attacked. Yet, when he speaks about France,

where he is openly gay, he shows that he has no sense of belonging or attachment to it.

Taïa's writing on homosexuality provoked a slew of reactions from supporters and

opponents, especially since homosexuality is a hotly debated topic in Morocco. Taïa

speaks directly about his homosexuality and expresses his views on the issue, which he

sees as individual freedom and a choice that should never be suppressed. In fact, there is

a lot to report, precisely because Taïa grew up in a time and region that made growing up

so difficult. Morocco, at least as he portrays it in his novels, is the home of renunciation,

a place of political, social and psychological deprivation. Taïa spent his youth under the

rule of King Hassan II, who suppressed the opposition with an iron fist and particularly

cracked down on Western-style youth protests.

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[43] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Karim Boukhari synthétise les réactions qui suivirent la déclaration de Taïa: généralement, elles tournent autour d'insultes homophobes. Selon Boukhari, *Al Massae*, le quotidien le plus diffusé au Maroc à l'époque, proposait de brûler vif l'écrivain. *Al Massae* reprochait également à la deuxième chaîne de télévision nationale de le faire passer à l'écran. C'est le même son de cloche qui retentit dans *Attajdid*, le quotidien officieux des islamistes du Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD)."

Abdellah Taïa drew considerable inspiration from the Freudian concept of melancholy, which prompted him to give his novel the title *An Arab Melancholia*. In his article "Self-Imposed Exile, Marginality, and Homosexuality in the Novels of Abdellah Taïa, Rachid O., and Eyet-Chékib Djaziri," Gibson Ncube argues that "this title shows that the affirmation of a 'gay' identity is certainly not without daunting repercussions and formidable problems" (Ncube 2020, 1831). Not only did Taïa tap into the Western psychoanalytical concept of melancholy, but he also tried to see how it might function within Arab history and culture, and particularly within the Arab body that he typifies. *An Arab Melancholia* is a novel that explores different moments connected by a recurring theme, which is that of melancholy. His body is presented as one that is split by four moments in which he encounters death, possession, Muslim and Moroccan spirituality, and jinn (or djinn).

I can translate the word 'jinn' as spirit, that is, a fantastic invisible being who appears in human, animal, or plant form. According to Annabelle Böttcher and Birgit Krawietz in their book *Islam, Migration and Jinn* (2021), jinn are "highly mobile spiritual beings, but *nota bene* not mere ghosts" (Böttcher and Krawietz 2021, 1). In many cases, jinn have a malevolent character, although not necessarily evil, and when free, they can affect people through possession or psychic influence, even stealing their energy. Their origin must be sought in the pre-Islamic cultures of the Middle East. However, Islam integrated them into its own world view, as it had done in its early days with many other local traditions. The Qur'an refers to them in many verses and has a Surah named after them, which is Surah Al-Jinn. This no doubt makes the belief in jinn persist in Morocco and other countries to this day. In her book *Storytelling in Chefchaouen Northern Morocco* (2014), Aicha Rahmouni discusses the existence of jinn in Moroccan and Arab-Muslim culture and contends:

> They are considered more powerful than men, but less powerful
> than angels. The jinn is capable of humanly impossible tasks, and
> the intelligence of the jinn is considered much superior to that of
> humans. The belief in jinns is so strong in Muslim and thought
> that Muslim theologians judge disbelief in jinns as heresy.
> (Rahmouni 2014, 57)

In the Moroccan context, belief in the world of jinn is widespread. In Sidi Shamharush, located at an Atlas village, there is a marabout dedicated not to the tomb of a holy character but to a jinn known as the King of jinn. This jinn from Sidi Shamharush takes the form of a black dog during the day while appearing human at night. For some Moroccans, it is a sacred place as scores of people make pilgrimages to ask for intercession in the healing of mental illness and in the case of childless women, in the quest for pregnancy.

In *Abdellah Taïa: Marocain, gay et musulman* (2022) (*Abdellah Taïa: Moroccan, Gay and Muslim*), Florentin Chif-Moncousin and Jean Leclercq document the written version of an interview they conducted with Abdellah Taïa and the author Hassan Jarfi. They ask Taïa for his opinion on the presence of jinn in Moroccan culture, considering that he used to not believe in their existence. Taïa claims:

> When you have a sister who is possessed by a jinn, and every once
> in a while (at least once a week) that jinn wakes up, and all of a
> sudden she falls down, there's something of both the spectacle
> and the tragedy - of Greek theatre. You absolutely believe that it's
> a jinn inside her, that you have to do or invent something like talk
> to it or coax it out of her, to free her and leave her alone. How do
> you not want to be, in spite of everything, influenced and imbued
> with that? (Chif-Moncousin and Leclercq 2022, 22)[44]

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[44] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Quand vous avez une sœur qui est possédée par un djinn, que de temps en temps (au moins une fois par semaine) ce djinn se réveille, que tout à coup elle tombe, il y a quelque chose de l'ordre à la fois du spectacle et du tragique - du théâtre grec. Vous croyez absolument que c'est un djinn qui est en elle, qu'il faut faire ou inventer quelque chose comme lui parler ou l'amadouer pour qu'il s'en aille, la libère et la laisse tranquille. Comment voulez-vous ne pas être, malgré tout, influencé et imprégné par ça?"

The possession Taïa speaks of is a spiritual state in which the person is not fully aware of what is going on or what they are doing, saying or seeing. It is a condition in which the body acts in awkward and abnormal ways and exhibits unusual behavior.

In Morocco, it is believed that the possessed person must have committed a misdeed that caused jinn to possess them. The behaviors which Moroccans believe make people possessed are showing a naked body in front of the mirror, talking, singing or screaming in the bathroom, pouring hot water in the sink, urinating without cleaning the toilet, interalia. Nevertheless, there are three main reasons for the possession of people by jinn in Muslim countries. The first reason is love and passion for the person. When this happens, the person is believed to be possessed by *al-jinn al-ashiq* (الجن العاشق) (the loving jinn) because of incessant infatuation with one's naked body or a woman's hair that are constantly flaunted in front of the mirror. This particular jinn creates numerous challenges for the afflicted individual when they develop affection for or wish to marry someone else. The second reason is magic, which makes jinn dominate the body; here the jinn is called the servant of magic. This happens when a wizard practicing witchcraft gets money from someone to harm another person by making them possessed by jinn. The third reason is *al-'ayn wa al-hassad* (العين والحسد) (evil eye and envy). It happens when people are jealous of someone or get excessively infatuated with them for their beauty or a rare quality, which is '*al-ayn* (العين), or when that person is excessively hated by other people for that quality, which is *al-hassad* (الحسد). When *al-'ayn wa al-hassad* is intense, it opens up opportunities for the jinn to possess the designated person. *Al-'ayn wa al-hassad* is considered as one thing but consists of two separate components, meaning that it is not mandatory for them to come together, but if either of them is strong, the person may become possessed.

The novel shows that in the letter to his mother about homosexuality, Abdellah Taïa refers to the Amazigh[45] heritage that she passed on to him. He describes it as strange, beguiling rituals and beliefs about homosexuality. Furthermore, he argues that the existence of jinn, witchcraft, and oral tales about spirits are part of Moroccan popular culture. In his book *Spirit Possession Around the World* (2015), Joseph P. Laycock argues that:

> Morocco has an especially rich tradition of *jinn* possession, including numerous techniques and religious specialists that can exorcise or protect against the *jinn* as well as groups that venerate *jinn*. A survey conducted in 2013 indicated that 90 percent of Moroccans believe in *jinn*. (Laycock 2015, 243)

The Amazigh and Arab heritage are the biggest components of Moroccan history and culture. This conflation is echoed by Taïa in his novel *An Arab Melancholia* to reflect key aspects of Moroccan heritage and Morocco's view of jinn, homosexuality and other controversial issues, but Abdellah Taïa personifies Moroccan society by shrinking it down only to the society which he confronts as a non-heterosexual individual.

In the novel, Abdellah Taïa speaks about what he calls "*le viol collectif*" (gang rape) by men in his neighborhood. In Chif-Moncousin and Leclercq's already mentioned book *Abdellah Taïa: Marocain, gay et musulman* (2022) (*Abdellah Taïa: Moroccan, Gay and Muslim*), Taïa describes Moroccans' perception of his homosexuality and informs the interviewer:

> I am not saying that they welcomed me as a gay man and were anything but kind, quite the contrary. There were extremely difficult things: they didn't defend me when people insulted me or when they tried to rape me, even when they raped me, they knew and they said nothing. Today, the Abdellah that I am does not feel like blaming them. I understand very well the system of Arab and Moroccan society: what to say, what not to say. I understand that they themselves were aware of all this and that it

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[45] The Amazighs of Morocco (also known as the Berbers, a name which they consider derogatory) are an indigenous civilization in northern and sub-Saharan Africa that has existed for millennia. They are referred to as Amazighen, "free men," and are the descendants of nomadic or sedentary tribes that are generally rural and have experienced numerous invasions.

was for such and such a reason that they didn't say anything: that above all that, there was a policy that was decided upon and that pushed the poor to suffocate each other. (Chif-Moncousin and Leclercq 2022, 23)[46]

For Abdellah Taïa, gang rape corresponds to a kind of fall that is constantly repeated, as his novel builds on a replay of the original moment when he realizes that Moroccan society locks him into the entrenched and clichéd identity of an effeminate young boy being raped by all the frustrated men in the neighborhood:

> Three boys came up to me. Unexpectedly they were standing in front of me […] I knew what they wanted. I knew what I was in for. But I didn't know what to do. They were bigger than me. One of them was handsome, arrogant, with a hint of a beard. He did the talking, knew what he wanted, gave the orders. He said, "You've got a nice ass!" He moved in swiftly, close, put one hand on my shoulder and started feeling my ass with the other one. He was shaking slightly. He hesitated. I could see it on his pretty face, he was determined to have his way. I was his prey. He wasn't going to let me get away that easily. (Taïa 2012, 14-15)[47]

The encounter between Abdellah and the three boys showcases a confrontational situation where he is objectified and subjected to the sexual desires of the dominant other. This conflict further emphasizes the performative nature of gender and sexuality, as these boys seek to assert their dominance and control over Abdellah who finds himself caught within this power play.

Being gay has made the theme of homosexuality very important in Taïa's life and writing and, to some extent, shaped his view of the world due to the intricacy of positioning oneself in relation to it. He always situates himself in relation to his novels

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[46] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Je ne suis pas en train de dire qu'ils m'ont bien accueilli comme homosexuel et qu'ils n'ont été que gentils. Bien au contraire. Il y a eu des choses extrêmement difficiles: ils ne m'ont pas défendu quand les gens m'insultaient ou quand ils essayaient de me violer même quand ils me violaient, ils savaient et ils ne disaient rien. Aujourd'hui, l'Abdellah que je suis n'a pas envie de les accabler. Je comprends très bien le système de la société arabe et marocaine: ce qu'il faut dire, ce qu'il ne faut pas dire. Je comprends qu'eux-mêmes avaient conscience de tout cela et que c'est pour telle ou telle raison qu'ils ne disaient rien: qu'au-dessus de tout ça, il y avait une politique qui était décidée et qui poussait les pauvres à s'étouffer les uns les autres."

[47] The novel was originally published in French in 2008 by Éditions du Seuil in Paris, France.

upon their publication in Morocco, which he considers risky, especially when they are catalogued as homosexual. Although this does not frighten him, Taïa firmly believes that as a young writer from a poor background, he finds it necessary to confirm his sexual difference and assert his homosexual identity within his environment, with a direct discussion of his own sexuality using the pronoun "I."

VI.2   Autofiction and the "I" in *An Arab Melancholia*

An Arab Melancholia is a fictional work woven with an autobiographical story of its author. In it, Abdellah Taïa speaks at length about much of his suffering and aspirations within Moroccan society. This autofictional novel is important in that it allows the reader to easily relate the events described in the story to Taïa's own life story. With the use of the "I," it is the author who tells his own story and internalizes most of the events around him. This way, the text is often imbued with the narrator's particular point of view and language. Opinions vary widely on whether a novel requires this type of narration, but Taïa, I argue, chooses the first person because he wants to deliver an intimate story that he has intensely experienced, and which is embodied in his protagonist.

An Arab melancholia is based on the real life of Abdellah Taïa, who speaks about himself both as an author and as a protagonist to emphasize his presence as the main subject denoting and being denoted by the themes discussed in the novel. In order to fully understand the ideas that Taïa is trying to convey, we need to be aware of the social, cultural and personal circumstances in which the novel was written, for the author's life and his coherent account of it provide the context.

The term 'autofiction,' which is chiefly associated with the French writer and literary scholar Serge Doubrovsky, means a completely different fusion of fiction and autobiography. In his book *The Late-Career Novelist* (2017), Hywel Dix discusses the origin and definition of the term by arguing:

> 'Autofiction' is a term coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in his 1977 novel *Fils* to refer to a writing practice between fiction and autobiography. Over the course of the subsequent four decades the practice has gained considerable momentum. It has become established as a recognizable genre within the French literary pantheon, with Doubrovsky, Christine Angot, Chloé Delaume, Annie Ernaux, Philippe Forest, Dany Laferrière and Camille Laurens among its prime exponents. Over the same period, autofiction has attracted increasing critical scrutiny such that it has become established also as a dynamic field of scholarly research. (Dix 2017, 157)

The term is well known, but its limitations are still disputed. When Doubrovsky coined the term in 1977, self-writing was not new. Dante, Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras and Philip Roth spoke of themselves in their works. Before the expansion of the use of autofiction, anything written in the first person and inspired by real life was classified as memoir or autobiography, although perhaps now, if some embellished or invented detail was found in the written work, it would be classified as autofiction. It is a hybrid genre in which the authenticity of the facts told is less important than how the experience of reality is brought into the narrative. Whether questioned, theorized or praised, the debate over the relevance of autofiction is still ongoing.

Doubrovsky asserts that autofictional writing has invariable characteristics. On the backcover of *Fils*, Doubrovsky writes:

> [Autofiction is] a fiction, made from strictly real events and facts; if you like, an autofiction, for having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, beyond any wisdom or syntax of the novel, whether traditional or new.[48]

Doubrovsky is well known for his persistent emphasis on the distinction between autofiction and autobiography that, according to Elizabeth H. Jones's *Spaces of Belonging* (2007), he has been "accused of being a pioneer of 'anti-autobiography'" (Jones 2007, 97). In fact, Doubrovsky claims that autofiction undermines the milestones

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[48] See the backcover of the novel.

that make a written work autobiographical, and this idea is further clarified by Margaretta

Jolly in her *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2013):

> The reality of the real is denied in its formal realization. Language itself becomes the main event. […] Doubrovsky identifies autofiction as a subversion of the referentialist sustaining conventional paradigm auto/biographical discourse. That language can and should refer depends on the idea that there is a reasonably solid referent out there, or back there in the past, to which language can correspond: a life, a life story; a self, a self story. (Jolly 2013, 187)

It could be argued that literary autobiographies, that is, autobiographies of novelists, are

always about the birth and life of the author, about becoming an author, moving on in

life, and celebrating their rebirth as an author. On the contrary, autofiction unmasks the

author in the performative sense as the entity that produces the text, precisely at the

moment when it enables them to make an authorial appearance in the first place.

Autofiction is the linking of the arrangement of facts and their linguistic processing to the

writing of the self. It is an act of merging personal and fictional self-descriptions. In this

way, the author and protagonist become both the source of creation and representation.

The act of writing the author's life story only takes place through the fictionalization of

the events experienced by the author, which inevitably entails a specific use of language

and narration and where the name of the author becomes the decisive criterion for

determining how it is received.

In their chapter "A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and

Reading" from the book *The Autofictional* (2022), Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons

delve into the cognitive and holistic approaches to autofiction and define autofictional

writing and reading. According to them, "scholarly accounts have typically taken a

literary critical perspective, positioning autofictions as contemporary cultural products"

(Effe and Gibbons 2022, 62). For us, autofiction is a response to the need to look within

and a way to recognize oneself in their experiences. It seeks to defend the collective

potential of individual stories, following the societal maxim of making the personal a political and cultural cause. It is thus a narrative in which the individual and the collective are related and become an integral part of the author's inner aspirations.

The role of the author is mainly overlooked when discussing autofictional works; however, it is, in Effe's and Gibbons's words, "equally subject to critical conjecture" (ibid, 62). In his article "Fictionality and Autofiction," Siddharth Srikanth argues:

> [Autofiction is] a work in which the author is the protagonist, in which the author's biographical background and life experiences inform the nonfictionality of the work and in which the author combines fictionality and nonfictionality at length for his or her purpose. (Srikanth 2019, 34)

This combination of fictionality and nonfictionality is of central importance in Henrik Skov Nielsen's chapter "What's in a Name? Double Exposures in Lunar Park" from the book *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho/Glamorama/Lunar Park* (2011), where he contends:

> Autofiction troubles the tradition of classical narratology and structuralism in which the relationship between narrator and author has traditionally been a cornerstone in the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. (Nielsen 2011, 131)

Nielsen's argument lies in the idea that the texts that present fictional and nonfictional dimensions of writing are, as he describes, "overdetermined" because according to him, autofiction is a genre "that sends mixed or mutually exclusive messages about its status as fiction or as nonfiction" (ibid, 131).

In Abdellah Taïa's case, autofiction often helps him present narratives that closely align with his own experiences, featuring protagonists who grapple with their sexual identity and navigate the complexities of their relationships with society. By drawing from his personal journey, Taïa brings authenticity and emotional depth to his portrayal of gay characters and their struggles. Taia not only explores his own individual experiences but also sheds light on broader societal issues and power dynamics. He

challenges Moroccan traditional norms and exposes the constraints imposed by culture, religion, and societal expectations. By intertwining elements of fiction, Taïa creates a space for self-reflection and invites readers to empathize with queer individuals in their quest for self-acceptance and understanding.

In *An Arab Melancholia*, Abdellah Taïa not only uses the "I" to refer to himself as the protagonist, but also to claim that Abdellah is his name. This assertion puts the protagonist, the author and their identical story at the center of the novel. He begins the story by talking about a friend of his whose name is Abdellah:

> Looking for a friend of mine who had the same first name as me, Abdellah, the son of Ssi[49] Aziz […] At night, he and I, Abdellah times two, established this forbidden pleasure as our ultimate goal. (Taïa 2012, 12)

The choice of a friend with the same name is indicative of Abdellah Taïa's self-image. He uses a form of autofiction through which the self is also reflected in the other characters. By describing pleasure as "our ultimate goal," he clones himself into the other Abdellah with whom he shares the same sexual desires. Through reading about their sexual relations, one can hardly tell that the scenes are acted out by two separate men; on the contrary, they point to the singularity and uniqueness of Abdellah's sexual orientation in the eyes of another Abdellah as some sort of "mirror stage."[50]

Through a reading that aims to break away from Abdellah Taïa's sole character as the primary interpretation of his novel, it is plausible to argue that he constructs himself in the novel as much as he aligns the elements of the writing with the Other, which characterizes *An Arab Melancholia*. In fact, the self is understood and narrated by Taïa

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[49] In *Darija* (the Moroccan dialect), the word "Ssi" is used before the names of men older than the speaker, whom they respect, or men holding high positions. For women, the word used is "Lalla."

[50] The Mirror stage is a concept in psychoanalytic theory developed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. It refers to a crucial stage in a child's psychological development, typically occurring between the ages of six and eighteen months. Lacan's mirror stage offers insights into the formation of the self, the role of imagery and identification in self-perception, and the ongoing quest for a cohesive sense of identity throughout an individual's life.

when speaking about the Other, which he perceives and inscribes in his being and words, just as that Other in turn inscribes him. Therefore, thinking about writing the Other through writing the self naturally leads to questioning the constitution of the self in Taïa's work and with it the question of identity.

An Arab Melancholia is a novel that intertwines queer theory and self-representation. It is Taïa's niche where he holds on to his homosexuality while speaking out about it. Through the act of writing, he highlights the marginalization he endures, merging the social and cultural war he faces with the literary comeback that he wages against his society while remaining connected to both.

In his book *Queer Theory in Education* (1998), William F. Pinar argues:

> In its more subversive form, queer theory actually is one more variation on a poststructural theory of the self that is deeply suspicious of all identity categories, viewing them as (at least in part) regulatory mechanisms of the dominant culture, involved in locating the self within binary oppositional power relations and within the rigid boundaries or borders that police difference (Sedgwick, 1990: Seidman, 1996). The aim of queer theory and other poststructural theories of the self is to deconstruct the binary oppositions that govern identity formation, that is, to reveal the power relations that lie behind them and the "truth games" they organize and are organized by. (Pinar 1998, 97)

Abdellah Taïa's relationship with his homosexuality is undoubtedly consistent with queer theory. Through *An Arab Melancholia*, he invites the reader to perceive his sexuality by freeing it from societal constraints. He, hence, perceives his homosexuality as a catalyst for social experiences that hinder his sexuality:

> From my first life, my first lifetime, my childhood spent being naked, alone naked, sometimes naked in a group, just one smell remains, a strong, human, disturbing, possessive smell. It's my mother M'Barka's smell. The smell that comes from her country-girl, slightly overweight body, the one which tells me that she hasn't bathed in a week. A smell that comes from the same place we do. Her, me. Tadla—that small town which the Oum Rabii River runs through. I am with her in her body. Like her, I come from that region, which I have never known. Never breathed in. But through M'Barka, that world of yesterday pulses through me

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> today, throbs as I race towards my home and outwards to the
> faraway, the light, but soon happy dream of another life, the one
> that started before I began. (Taïa 2012, 10-11)

The intersection of queer theory and Taia reflecting on his childhood memories lies in the exploration of how his personal experiences and societal constructs shape his understanding of sexuality and identity. He then examines social norms and cultural influences that impact his understanding of their own body and self. For him, speaking about the self mostly refers to the Other who is involved in the construction of his own identity. He is not stripped of his identity. His mother's roots, appearance and smell are primal parts of his childhood, functioning as an olfactive memory aspect of his past, which brought him to the present, and which in turn is a threshold to the future he strives for. This is where the complexity of self-reference in Taïa's novel comes into play. Giving too much importance to it would dilute that part of the Other contained within the self, thereby diminishing the homosexuality that he defends. In the same way, placing the Other too prominently would obliterate the constitutive part of the self that this same dimension conceals.

In *An Arab Melancholia*, Taïa's functions as an author and narrator are rolled into one, as the novel blurs the line between reference and fiction. In the course of the novel, a stock of perceptions of the Other, Taïa's role and social constitution are aggregated and his ego is constantly embodied by others, who are usurpers. Thus the acts of writing and reading are liberated from the core of Abdellah Taïa.

VI.3   Resisting Masculinity and Sexual Language in Morocco

An Arab Melancholia depicts the literary emergence of queer Moroccan identity, by means of which Taïa emphasizes the deconstruction of Moroccan heritage. My analysis explores the construction of queer Moroccan masculinity, since it is inextricably linked to patriarchy, and thus for Taïa, the affirmation of queer masculinity requires a

deconstruction of patriarchy and heterosexual norms that stand as the unjustly dominant counterpart of queer sexuality.

The writing of Moroccan masculinity is developed in *An Arab Melancholia*, where the reader embarks on a journey to Hay-Salam, Abdellah's neighborhood in Sale. The novel's title introduces an interesting perspective on the concept of melancholy. While nostalgia emphasizes a desire to return to the past, melancholy refers to the depressed present that may be linked to a specific past event. The title then evokes an idiosyncratic reaction in the reader, an expectation that the novel will define as Moroccan melancholy. This connection is reinforced by the title of the first chapter "I remember," which introduces a direct comparison between the text's present and past.

The contiguity between past and present, and between heterosexuality and homosexuality is renewed from the first lines of the novel as the narrator declares that he is in his "second life," which raises the question of what happened in the first. Consequently, Taïa announces a paradigm shift that allows for the expression of a Moroccan queer masculinity. The novel, then, documents a collision between heterosexual and homophobic Morocco, and although Sophie Catherine Smith, in her article "Être ce qui ne se dit pas: Negotiating a Gay Identity in Abdellah Taïa's *Une Mélancolie arabe*," argues that the assertion of a gay identity in the context of a society where the existence of such an identity is often denied is a very tough process (Smith 2012, 35), Taïa emphatically seeks to place marginal sexualities at the center of societal debate.

Abdellah and his friend Abdellah, whose family name is not mentioned, spend nights masturbating together. His friend's father, Ssi Aziz, finds out and throws Abdellah out of the house. Abdellah brings back the scene and reiterates Ssi Aziz's speech verbatim:

> His father, usually so nice, the very image of a pious man, opened the front door and in a furious voice chased me from the front step. "Go play somewhere else, you dog, you piece of shit... Go on, get out of here... Abdellah is sleeping now... Leave us alone, you bastard... Move it, I said get going... You poor trash... Get outta here..." It was a degree of violence that left me speechless. That day, Ssi Aziz was not a good Muslim. (Taïa 2012, 13)

The father embodies patriarchy, "being usually nice" embodies Morocco's attitude towards heterosexuality, and being a pious man embodies Islam. These pillars of Moroccan society become intransigently antagonistic towards a person when accused of non-heterosexuality. The expression "Leave us alone" brings with it the beginning of Abdellah's marginalization and "us" encompasses the entire society wherefrom he is excluded. Abdellah wanders the streets reflecting: "I wasn't like everyone else" (ibid, 13), a reminder of the Moroccan traditionalism he is constantly confronted with. This confirms Jean Zaganiaris's take on the place of homosexuality in Moroccan society. In his article "La question Queer au Maroc" (The Queer Question in Morocco), Zaganiaris argues that "in principle, to speak of 'queer' when thinking about issues of sexuality or gender in Morocco seems provocative" (Zaganiaris 2012, 146).[51]

In Morocco, the idea of a queer identity can only be expressed in *hshouma* (حشومة) (shame) and social exclusion. Highlighting the words used in *Darija* (دارجة) (the Moroccan dialect) is very important to contextualize the Moroccan attitude towards sexuality and all aspects considered shameful in Moroccan society and culture because in Morocco, language plays a central role in confirming what is acceptable and what is rejected. In Ryan K. Schroth's article "Queer Shame," he confirms convincingly that "both Moroccan society and the colonial system deploy/ed shame as a tool to instil fear and shape control" (Schroth 2021, 144). Abdellah Taïa attempts to create a literary space

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[51] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "A priori, parler de 'queer' pour penser les questions relatives à la sexualité ou au genre au Maroc semble relever de la provocation."

that challenges *hshouma* and the socio-cultural control of patriarchy, and focuses on the marginal sexuality of the protagonists he portrays in his novels, particularly *An Arab Melancholia*. This challenge is the result of a writing on queer issues that began to be detected in Moroccan literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

The term *hshouma* is used daily by Moroccans as a noun synonymous with 'shame' and as an adjective for 'shameful.' Its word family hosts an abundance of words such as the imperative verb *hshem* (حشم), used to ask someone to display shyness or to stop being bold; *hshoumi* (حشومي) (for a man) and *hshoumiya* (حشومية) (for a woman), used to describe someone who is usually shy or blushes; *hashman* (حشمان) and *hashmana* (حشمانة), respectively to describe a man or woman who is shy at the moment of speaking; and *tahshima* (تحشيمة), a noun used to describe a terrible disappointment.

Hshouma refers to an individual or collective feeling that occurs within a social and cultural framework; it is also part of a normative order to distinguish between what is 'shameful' and what is not, and to act as a code of social sanctions. Although we live in an era of globalization, the term *hshouma* is still used in different contexts in Morocco. The most serious connection is that of sexuality, and since talking about sexuality is in itself *hshouma*, Moroccans always use metaphors to discuss this topic. *Hshouma* is used when it comes to conforming to conventional and socially accepted behaviors. That a woman cannot cook or be good at housework is not a serious problem, but it is socially *hshouma*. The term is also used when talking about universal values such as taking care of one's parents, being loyal, honest and respectful, and keeping promises, among other things. Thus, any violation of these values is very *hshouma*. Moroccans also use the term in a religious context; what is considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam is culturally and socially *hshouma*. Fasting in Ramadan is obligatory for all Muslims who are mentally and physically capable of fasting and who have reached puberty, but when a woman is

menstruating, Islam permits her to have breakfast. Although she has the right to eat and drink, it is *hshouma* in Morocco to do so in front of her father or brothers as it is a sign that she is having her period, which is also *hshouma* to discuss with the people she respects and she is not very open with.

The term *hshouma* has been used by a myriad of authors and novelists, but only few of them discussed its significance for Moroccans. In her book *Sex and Lies* (2017), Moroccan author Leïla Slimani explains the importance of the term within Moroccan perimeters:

> Another cornerstone of Moroccan society is the concept of *hshouma*, which translates as 'shame' or 'embarrassment,' and which is inculcated in every one of us from birth. To be well brought up, an obedient child, a good citizen, also means being alive to shame and regularly to demonstrate modesty and restraint. (Slimani 2020, 3)[52]

Moroccan novelist Siham Benchekroun also tackled what was considered *hshouma* in her novel *Oser vivre* (*Dare to Live*) (1999). She explains:

> It was *hshouma* to stay up late at night with her fiancé, *hshouma* to appear in skimpy clothes in front of her parents-in-law, *hshouma* to dance in public […] (Benchekroun 1999, 42)[53]

Even Abdellah Taïa mentioned the term in his novel *Another Morocco* (2017):

> Saying "I love you" is difficult. Uttering that sentence in the presence of one's father is unthinkable where I come from. Hshouma, shame. (Taïa 2017, 21-22)

In Morocco, *hshouma* establishes what society wants to preserve in the social and cultural order. The term covers several registers of meaning. It seems to be a call to order when the norms of Moroccan society are violated, and it is through the language used that

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[52] The book, originally titled *Sexe et mensonges*, was authored in French in 2017 and later released in 2020 in an English translation by Sophie Lewis.

[53] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "C'était *hchouma* de veiller tard le soir avec son fiancé, *hchouma* de paraître en tenue négligée devant ses beaux parents, *hchouma* de danser en public […]" The word *hshouma* is written with an 's' in English and with a 'c' in French.

we understand the meaning given to it in these registers. Nonetheless, I can say that it is in the field of sexuality that the strongest connotation of *hshouma* crystallizes. It should be noted that *hshouma* is not a social fact that can be objectified and observed. In fact, it can only be addressed linguistically according to the situation in which it occurs and only exists through the eyes of the other, since we can only speak of *hshouma* when we judge someone else and want to reflect other people's mistakes.

In Morocco, one of the most peculiar aspects of *hshouma* is the menstrual pad. Moroccan society not only denounces television commercial breaks advertising pads, but also puts the brakes on any discussion about them. Long before the creation of supermarkets, Moroccans bought and still buy the items they need at the grocery store. If a girl or woman wants to buy a pad, she cannot ask the grocer to give it to her, especially when there are people around. That a woman buys a pad herself is a mere exception as the majority of women cannot go to the grocery store; they just ask their younger brothers to bring it to them as it is very *hshouma* to ask their older brothers or fathers for it. When the little boy is in the store, he asks the grocer to wrap the pad in a black or opaque handkerchief or in a useless paper to hide it, and at home, the sister has to be given the pad secretly.

Reading Taïa, we understand that his perspective on *hshouma* is complex, as he both acknowledges its oppressive effects while also challenging and subverting its influence. Through *An Arab Melancholia*, Taïa engages in introspection to examine the effects of *hshouma*, illustrating how it can engender a culture permeated by silence and denial. This cultural concept compels individuals to conceal their authentic identities and desires, particularly when they deviate from the regulations of Moroccan masculinity, a construct that Taïa himself defies.

In the novel, Abdellah is an effeminate young boy. The effeminacy he embodies is primarily associated with condescending terms that belittle the effeminate boy's masculinity. Jeffrey Weeks, in his foreword to *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies* (1992), examines the attitude of Muslim society towards men who do not exhibit manly traits. He proclaims:

> Men may have sex with other males, without social obloquy, as long as they are the penetrators, and their partners are boys, or in some cases effeminate men (that is, just like the Western pattern, men who are not "real men". (Weeks 1992, x)

In this respect, "the disavowal of femininity is particularly strong for Arab men for cultural and religious reasons, making everyday effeminacy often impossible to live openly" (Rees-Roberts 2008, 185), argues Nick Rees-Roberts in his article "Kiffe La Racaille." Contemptuous attitudes towards effeminacy are still maintained in today's Arab-Muslim society, as in Morocco, the male who exhibits effeminate demeanor is derogatorily called *mhatwan* (محتون), *hatita* (حتيتة) or *mbennet* (مبنت), derived from the Arabic word *bent* (بنت), meaning a girl. In his *Encyclopedia of Gay Histories and Cultures* (2013), George Haggerty emphasizes the generally negative perception of effeminacy, stating:

> The popular imagination often associates effeminacy with the supposedly telltale audible and physical signs of a man's homosexuality. Pejorative terms like "faggot" in the United States and "poor" in the United Kingdom invoke a well-known stereotype of the gay man as a limp-wristed, lisping, mincing individual who deviates from the male norm because he embodies femininity, not masculinity. (Haggerty 2013, 341)

In the Moroccan context, Abdellah's effeminacy drives men in his neighborhood, mainly Chouaïb, to call him "Leïla," an Arabic name for women, and to also call him *zamel* (زامل). For Abdellah, this is a derogatory interpretation of his sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Taïa tends to use the term *zamel* rather than the French pejorative term *pédé*. In *Contested Borders* (2022), William J. Spurlin contends:

> Taïa writes of defying directly the mere replacement of his gender
> identity through feminisation by taking on willingly the passive
> role in his sexual encounter with Chouaïb, acknowledging, yet
> resisting, the shame and degradation that goes with being cast in
> the role of *zamel*, transforming the role into a site of pleasure and
> erotic autonomy while rejecting the assignation or appropriation
> of his gender through being given the name of Leïla in the sexual
> encounter. (Spurlin 2022, 191)

In the Moroccan context, *zamel* is the term used to describe a passive gay and, at times, a transgender individual. It is only used to talk about the individual who is being penetrated or practices fellatio or other heterosexually women-related acts with another man. It is a slanderous term used to humiliate and demean the passive homosexual man. It derives from the Moroccan term *zemla* (زملة), meaning either excessive horniness or the craving for sex (referring to both men and women) or the state of being *zamel*. However, when a woman behaves very sensually, swinging as she walks and uttering her words with a sexual intonation, this is called *tqahbin* (تقحبين), which stands for the set of actions that a *qahba* (قحبة) (bitch) performs. In *Darija*, the term 'prostitute' does not exist and the corresponding term *bagha'* (بغاء), meaning 'prostitution' belongs to the classical language and has not been integrated. Yet, the insulting term *qahba* is used, morally condemning and stigmatizing a girl or a woman. To define the activity politely as such, Moroccans use the verb *katfsad* (كتفسد), meaning 'she corrupts.' In the general context, the fact that someone displays *zemla* means that they want to "get fucked" and are showing interest in sex.

The term *zemla* is also used in non-sexual contexts. When there is an environment where people need to be serious and someone exhibits naughty or childish behavior, they are told *baraka men zemla* (بركة من الزملة), which generally means to stop behaving unconventionally. In fact, that the phrase *baraka men zemla* is meant to prompt someone to stop odd and unconventional behavior indicates that being *zamel* means standing outside the socially and culturally conventional constitution that dictates

heteronormative rules. *Zemla* is then used to describe a person's actions when used inappropriately in a particular context, reflecting the inappropriate presence of the homosexual subject in such a ruthlessly heterosexual society.

The word *zamel* is synonymous with other Moroccan words such as *attay* (عطاي), *naqsh* (نقش), *lubia* (لوبية), *ghouzo* (غوزو) and *zwimel* (زويمل), which belongs to the *zamel* word family. There is also a nascent word that stands for a homosexual man in Morocco, which is *pikala* (بيكالا). In Morocco, *pikala* means bicycle. Very recently, it has begun to be used to refer to a homosexual man to emphasize the similarity between him and the bicycle, since both are ridden by someone. It is also used because it is believed that there is a resemblance between the saddle of a bicycle and a gay man's "ass." However, these words are used only in street contexts, to refer pejoratively to male homosexuals or in Plus-Eighteen movies. Contrastingly, in academic contexts, newspapers or on television, the standard Arabic words *shadh* (شاذ), occasionally transliterated as *shath*, and *mithli* (مثلي) are used. Abdellah Taïa has recently encouraged the use of *mithli* instead of *zamel*, an idea I have started to be aware of through his interviews and social media posts.

In her book *Anthem of Misogyny* (2022), Moroccan Author Ibtissam Bouachrine defines the term *zamel* as follows:

> The derogatory term *zamel*, "passive homosexual," is meant to call into question a man's *rujula* (manhood), or masculinity, as penetrability, in a homophobic and misogynistic cultural context, places him at the same level of inferiority as a woman. (Bouachrine 2022, 117, brackets mine)

It is worth bearing in mind that there is no word in the Moroccan dialect for a fundamentally active, penetrating man in regards to homosexual intercourse. The word that can sometimes refer to an active person, whether with men or women is *rajl* (راجل), which literally means "man;" however, there is no term used solely to refer to the

penetrator, as the masculinity of the penetrator is never questioned. Sophie Catherine

Smith contends:

> A normative masculinity displayed through penetration of the
> socially inferior Other in order to express its dominance,
> representing the physical manifestation of a rigid dichotomy
> whereby the penetrated is relegated to the status of non-man or,
> at best, 'less-of-a-man.' (Smith 2012, 37)

Thus, it is the basic dichotomy of active/passive that does not exist, not just the term

'active' itself. If the word *zamel* can indeed be translated as passive, then it is only by an

effect of translation fiction. The *zamel* is the *attay* (giver), the one who gives his body

and, above all, puts himself in a state of dependence, which leads to the tarnishing of the

zamel's honor and his family's reputation.

Although *Hshouma* is a typically Moroccan term, almost all Arab cultures share

the same notions associated with shame. Sexuality is one of the most sensitive and

undisputed issues for Arabs when it takes place out of wedlock. If a woman loses her

virginity without marriage, she is charged with *zina* (adultery) and slandering the *sharaf*

(شرف) (honor) of her family. *Sharaf* has been an interesting concept for many writers. In

her book *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature* (2010), Dalya Abudi

argues:

> While honor in its nonsexual connotation is termed *sharaf*, a
> woman's sexual honor is called *'ird*. The *sharaf* of the man
> depends on the *'ird* of the women in his family. Under all
> circumstances, a girl must preserve her virginity intact until her
> first marriage. To lose her virginity to anyone but her husband is
> the gravest sin she can commit. Correspondingly, the greatest
> dishonor that can befall a man results from the sexual misconduct
> of his daughter, sister, or cousin (*bint 'amm*) [The daughter of the
> father's brother]. (Abudi 2021, 68)

Many Arab men have committed crimes against "sinful" women after losing their

virginity without being married. In their discussion of this issue, Jerrold S. Greenberg,

Clint E. Bruess and Sara B. Oswalt write in their book *Exploring the Dimensions of Human Sexuality* (2016) that:

> For centuries, Arab men have engaged in "honor killing"—the intrafamily killing of errant females. Honor killing has its roots in the crude Arabic expression "A man's honor lies between the legs of a woman." For Arab women, virginity before marriage and fidelity afterward are considered musts. Men are expected to control their female relatives. If a woman strays, it is widely believed, the dignity of the man can be restored only by killing her. (Greenberg, Bruess and Oswalt 2016, 338)

The concept of honor remains slippery. Arab societies have long believed that a girl who keeps her virginity until marriage is *sharifa* (شريفة) (an adjective used to refer to a girl who preserves her *sharaf*). However, *sharaf* is a relative and an unsteady concept. Islam has forbidden all forms of contact between a man and a woman outside of marriage unless he is one of her or she is one of his *maharim* (محارم)[54]. The woman is not allowed to remove her veil in the man's presence, and no physical contact is allowed at their meetings, not even shaking hands. Religiously speaking, this is the real meaning of a woman's *sharaf* and *'iffa* (chastity). In cultural contexts, *sharaf* remains linked to a girl's virginity. Nevertheless, there are exist debatable situations. There are many cases of girls getting vows from their male lovers to marry them, but immediately after losing their hymen, those girls become the only subject held responsible. Hence, if the girl is in a country or tribe where honor killings still exist, she is killed.

If we classify a girl by whether or not she is *sharifa*, how can we classify girls who have had superficial sex, do have an intact hymen and remain virgin after sex, or have had physical contact with men without being deflowered? There are countless cases of girls in Morocco and the Arab world only having anal sex so that they remain *sharifat*

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[54] *Maharim* is the plural of the word *mahram* (محرم). A *mahram* is a man whom Islam does not permit to have intercourse with or marry a woman either for kinship (brother, father, grandfather, son, son's son, paternal uncles, maternal uncles, and nephew, etc), for breastfeeding (the brother or father by breastfeeding), or for marriage (husband's father or grandfather, husband's son, etc.). For me detail, see *Surah An-Nisa*, verse 23.

(شريفات). Additionally, there is a rhyming phrase in Morocco sometimes used by *some* girls when they are with their boyfriends: *bouss w qiss w khelli blast la'ariss* (بوس وقيس وخلي بلاصة العريس), which means "kiss and touch, but stay away from the body part given to the groom," which is unmistakably the vagina.

How the notion of honor fits into male homosexuality is the linchpin of this discussion. Islam has forbidden sexuality out of wedlock and criminalized homosexuality in all its forms. Thus, any act of homosexual intercourse is illicit. Similarly, when penetrated, the homosexual passive man undoubtedly loses his honor; however, this loss is thus partly identifiable with the loss of reputation. The relationship between the disgrace of *zamel*'s homosexuality and the loss of honor must then be reconsidered from this point of view. The loss of honor in men has a lot to do with the loss of independence, and the stigmatization of the *zamel* is perhaps much more related to this loss, which, incidentally, is as much a relative loss of masculinity as it is to a sense of rejection.

The active partner in the homosexual relationship is not stigmatized because he retains all characteristics of masculinity: he is the one who takes and keeps the other in a dependent, submissive situation. This is highlighted in many of Taïa's novels. In *An Arab Melancholia*, we discover that even Abdellah finds that the active partner displays more masculine traits than he does:

> He came to mind quickly and I could see him standing in front of
> me, shoes off, barefoot just like me, but much more masculine,
> more of a man than I was (Taïa 2012, 18).

Abdellah Taïa's perspective on the masculinity of active and passive homosexual men is complex. While it is important to note that interpretations of his views may vary, Taïa has, at times, expressed a belief that the active homosexual man embodies a greater degree of masculinity compared to the passive counterpart, an idea he always expresses in his interviews. This can be seen within the framework of his personal experiences as a

homosexual man originating from a country where traditional gender roles and societal expectations often prioritize dominant and assertive forms of masculinity. This does not mean that the active man is heterosexual just because he does not desire the other's male body and is the only one who can assert his masculinity. It just means that he is punctually on the right side of the hierarchical dichotomy of active and passive subjects.

The stigma of the *zamel* serves as an incentive to engrave ideal masculinity and marks the shifting boundaries between a "real" man, who is always active, independent, and mobile, and a *zamel*, who is portrayed as an openly passive person who socially and culturally takes on the role of a woman as the insertee. Heteronormative Morocco, then, delineates a precise framework of masculinity by creating the category *zamel*, which serves as a self-definition for the ideal masculine. Since *zamel* is not an essence for Moroccans, but only an example of a loss of masculinity and a different version of femininity, it poses no real threat to the Moroccan heterocentric gender system.

Abdellah Taïa tries to place a new expression of masculinity, which is not heterosexual and not reduced to the term *zamel* (ibid, 132), at the center of the Moroccan social framework. He aims to construct his own true identity that transgresses the Moroccan socio-cultural knowledge that labels him as *zamel*. Led by Chouaïb, a group of men in Abdellah's neighborhood collectively penetrates him. Abdellah refers to Chouaïb, saying: "He called me all kinds of names: zamel, candy-ass, bitch, his little Leïla" (ibid, 24). Taïa is now aware of the pattern that automatically results in the penetration of a homosexual man, which he confirms in his interview with Alberto Fernández Carbajal asserting that "when you are a young, gay boy, people want to rip your skin" (Carbajal 2017, 500). Chouaïb tells Abdellah: "I'm not going to rape you all by myself … We're all going to rape you … We're all going to make a real girl out of you" (Taïa 2012, 25). The effeminacy displayed in Abdellah's mannerism incites them to have sex with him as,

for them, he is obviously a passive gay who can easily be assimilated to a woman. This intersects with David M. Halperin's association of feminine traits with being homosexual.[55] In his book *How To Be Gay* (2012), Halperin states: "The association of gay men with femininity is a cause for particular anxiety because it represents a throwback, a symbol of age-old homophobic prejudice" (Halperin 2012, 306). By being the active element during sex, these men confirm their masculinity in two respects: first by acting as the penetrator, and second by never being penetrated by the other man they are having sex with.

In the heterosexual Moroccan milieu, a man's masculinity is revealed only by being the penetrator of the woman. However, in the homosexual encounter, the active subject's avoidance of being penetrated is a double assertion of his masculinity. In this case, Abdellah's sexual desire is neglected by men. They do not view this intercourse as an interaction which all parties must enjoy; they, contrastingly, see it as an opportunity to inculcate their masculinity and treat Abdellah's femininity through the heteropatriarchal norms of Moroccan culture. When Chouaïb asks Abdellah if he is ready for sex, Abdellah states:

> I couldn't think of anything to say. I looked him straight in the eye. I wanted him to understand that I wasn't afraid. I wanted him to know that in another situation, another place, I would have been proud and happy to let him take me, but here under his rule, all I could do was obey him regardless of how I felt, obey his orders without a single stirring of pleasure. (Taïa 2012, 20)

Abdellah does not entirely refuse to play the passive role; what he denies instead is his relegation to a boy devoid of masculine traits, which requires that he adopt the female gender role.

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[55] Halperin contends that homosexual men have often been linked to stereotypes of femininity like effeminacy and a love for fashion and theater. He argues that these stereotypes can be adopted as a cultural expression of their homosexual identity, signaling belonging to the queer community and challenging traditional gender norms.

In her book *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler states:

> The feminist appropriation of sexual difference, whether written in opposition to the phallogocentrism of Lacan (Irigaray) or as a critical reelaboration of Lacan, attempts to theorize the feminine, not as an expression of the metaphysics of substance, but as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion. The feminine as the repudiated/excluded within that system constitutes the possibility of a critique and disruption of that hegemonic conceptual scheme. (Butler 1999, 37)

Abdellah seeks to prove that being perceived as a woman is not what he deeply aspires to, as the heteropatriarchal sphere that rules Morocco is hierarchical and relegates women to the lowest position. Being named Leïla, in Joseph Pomp's words in his article "Translating Desire," fills Abdellah with existential turmoil (Pomp 2018, 475). For Abdellah, loving men does not diminish his masculinity, which he confirms in talking about Chouaïb:

> I wanted to tell him repeatedly that a boy is a boy and a girl is a girl. Just because I loved men [sincerely] and always would, didn't mean that I was going to let him think of me as the opposite sex, let him destroy my identity, my history [just] like that.... Letting him call me Leïla, [no.] forget that, no way. (Taïa 2012, 21-22)

The ordeal Abdellah is undergoing is discussed and corroborated by Kenneth Clatterbaugh in his book *Contemporary Perspectives On Masculinity* (2018), in which he argues that:

> Homosexual men suffer from oppressions similar to those inflicted on women by heterosexual men; they are raped by straight men, battered and killed by heterosexual gangs, and mocked for their "effeminacy." […] It is these facts that lead gay men to conclude that heterosexual masculinity is strongly molded by homophobia. (Clatterbaugh 2018, 144)

Despite his young age, Abdellah's rejection of the female name given to him shows his conscious awareness of what it means to be a woman in Morocco. While having sex, Abdellah shrieks: "my name's not Leïla … I'm not Leïla … I'm Abdellah …

Abdellah Taïa …" (Taïa 2012, 24). This leitmotif strongly proves the idea that Abdellah is trying to convey. For him, activity and passivity, although ideally connoted with gender, should not be confused with masculinity or femininity but must be involved in the formation and construction of sexual identities.

Faced with insults and the stigma of feminization from Chouaïb, Abdellah engages in a monologue: "I thought about telling him my real name, telling him I was a boy, a man just like him […] I was Abdellah, Abdellah of Lot 15" (ibid, 21). Abdellah chooses to break with Chouaïb's constant classification of him as Leïla, and thus with Moroccan society, by affirming his own identity, which implies his queer masculinity. That being said, Chouaïb embodies Moroccan society because for him, Abdellah must only be Leïla because a man like Abdellah who lets himself be penetrated does not exist; only women are penetrated. In Morocco, masculinity and femininity are set within a heterocentric system of which the heterosexual couple remains the cornerstone. In this system, male homosexuality is ascribed the role of a negative and derogatory perception compared to masculinity, which is achieved within an exclusively heterosexual relationship.

When Abdellah feels excluded from society, he awakens memories of his earlier childhood when he "would still wander the streets without shoes and socks" (ibid, 13). While strolling, he encounters a group of children who represent a striking contrast to the previously experienced alienation, and he unequivocally admits: "I was just like them. I was of them" (ibid. 13). These children would alternately participate in a collective sex scene known as *nouiba* (نويبة). It is a hidden ceremony where boys take turns penetrating each other. Despite being constantly called *zamel*, Abdellah shows his attachment to these boys as he deeply feels that they provide a sanctuary in which he can display his homosexuality:

> I loved them. Yes I did. I stayed with them even when they insulted me, called me effeminate, told me I was a *zamel*, a passive faggot. (ibid, 13)

This shows that he recognizes his sociosexual situation as that of an outcast. Still, the desire he feels proves that he was aware of his sexuality but perhaps had not constructed it yet. Starting from this quote, Gibson Ncube contends that Abdellah "makes a conscious decision to accept his sexuality in spite of the inherent danger that he was courting by so doing" (Ncube 2020, 1829). Abdellah's sexuality, which allows for the creation of non-normative masculinity despite being culturally viewed as shameful, is for him more of a source of power than *hshouma* because, as Elspeth Probyn argues in *Blush: Faces of Shame* (2005), "whatever it is that shames you will be something that is important to you, an essential part of yourself" (Probyn 2005, x).

In fact, the tendency to use the term *zamel* is rooted in Taïa exploring what is specific to his culture and cannot be translated in French. He avoids Western terms used to refer to a male homosexual, such as 'gay' or 'homosexual.' Instead, he prefers to use the word *zamel* or describe homosexual relationships with the euphemistic expression "forbidden love" to represent Morocco with its language. Taïa writes:

> The Arabic language as a space of origins, a real, mental space where I dared to redefine who I was, dared to talk about everything, reveal everything and one day, write about everything, everything. Even *forbidden love.* (Taïa 2012, 110)

An Arab Melancholia is a fundamentally heteroglossic novel in which the presence of *Darija* is indispensable and serves to represent identity. In fact, Taïa's use of *Darija* remains the fundamental pillar of his homosexual identity, insofar as it structures not only the individual subject but also the collective subject. Taïa uses it because he cannot find French equivalents for some concepts and terms that are typically Moroccan. If he uses an approximate translation of the word he wants to emphasize, there is bound to be a

distortion of his ideas and thus an unclear description of how he identifies with Moroccan culture.

When I discuss language and homosexuality in the novel, I find it plausible to suggest that they are an integral part of the ultimate objective that Taïa strives for. Describing and defending his sexual orientation can in no way be conveyed clearly and accurately unless language serves that purpose. In his book *Queer Maghrebi French* (2017), Provencher focuses on the flexible language of sexuality used by same-sex French-speaking subjects coming from the Maghreb. The links between language and sexuality in these contexts, as Provencher demonstrates, are best defined as an accumulation of linguistic details drawn from French, English, and Tamazight (the language that the Amazigh speak) and Arabic. For Provencher, this accumulation offers Maghrebi French speakers different ways of expressing their "sexual selfhood, freedom, belonging and resilience" and to engage their "continued marginalization and exclusion" from family, French society, and French gay community (Provencher 2017, 30).

In his description of the homosexual scenes with other males, Taïa states:

> We did the *nouiba*: each guy pleasuring the next. We'd lower our pants and make love in a group. I could be myself with them. Myself and someone different. (Taïa 2012, 13)

In the Moroccan dialect, the word *nouiba* is a diminutive of the word *nouba* (نوبة), meaning "rotation" or "relay"; and *nouba* itself derives from the Classical Arabic word *tanawoub* (تناوب), literally translated in English as "alternation." The word *nouba* is used in Morocco when people are taking turns for something, queuing or playing a game that requires one or more people to wait their turn. However, the two words never overlap or are used interchangeably. *Nouiba* has only one connotation: male alternate homosexual penetration. It then represents sexual egalitarianism as all participants penetrate and are penetrated.

Moroccan writer and novelist Abdelhak Serhane discusses the notion of *nouiba* in his novel *Messaouda* (1983), presenting it as kind of egalitarian homosexuality:

> In this vast area reserved for Christian rubbish, we masturbated together and even, at the height of our frenzy, raped one of the group—the weakest or the youngest. If we were all equally matched we simply did the *nouiba* (one by one). (Serhane 1983, 106-107)[56]

Abdelhak Serhane's mention of collectively raping the weakest or youngest member of the group corresponds to Taïa being that weakest participant, having always been insulted and humiliated by his group. With the men, Abdellah's weakness was to be taken advantage of since they were physically stronger than him. He conveys Chouaïb's words:

> "It's on the second floor. Go up and wait for me... I'll join you in a minute... And you, Leïla, be nice, otherwise my two friends are going to hurt you... bad... You got that? Let me say it again. Things will turn ugly, real ugly, if you don't let us do exactly what we want. You understand what I'm saying? Yes or no?" (Taïa 2012, 25)

Describing another scene involving Chouaïb and the other men, Abdellah writes:

> They were breathing hard. They smelled. It was hot up there. The heat and sweat rippling from their bodies turned the room into a steam bath, an oven. They spat into their hands. Laughing. They had stopped talking. They were all over me. All five of them. I knew which one was Chouaïb. I had already memorized the way his skin felt, how soft it was, how dry. (ibid, 26-27)

Abdellah Taïa highlights the word *nouiba* and reminds the reader that this ceremony is specific to Moroccan culture and that the performativity of his masculinity will always be based on his "Moroccanness." In this way, he remains connected to Morocco even though his sexuality distances it from.

Reading through the lines, we discover that Chouaïb becomes shocked by Abdellah's new, unusual demeanor, which does not display docile, submissive and weak

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[56] The novel was translated into English by Mark Thompson and published in Manchester by Carcanet Press in 1995. The above quote is from the English version.

traits. His persistence in asserting his homosexual identity causes Chouaïb to change his view of Abdellah, who remarks:

> He was shocked. He'd finally figured it out. What he saw in my eyes had nothing to do with fear or submission. It didn't make him change his plans. He slapped me. Slapped me hard. My head was pounding, but I didn't cry. Instead, I punched him in the stomach without giving it a second thought. We started fighting, more violently than before. And this time, I wasn't happy to just hold my own. No, I turned into a ferocious little wildcat. (ibid, 24)

When Abdellah says "he'd finally figured it out," he demonstrates Chouaïb's was reading acknowledgment of queer Moroccan masculinity, which he had been relentlessly trying to suppress. What Abdellah explains underscores both the shock and the understanding that this version of Moroccan masculinity should not be relegated to femininity or excluded from its existence in the sociocultural realm. Taïa further describes this explicitly homosexual but implicity social and cultural strife as follows:

> That's what he liked, brawling. Brawling where each boy lost a little. Brawling where each boy went on the attack. He was really getting turned on, more and more aroused. And I was too. Getting angry, getting hard. We slugged it out, real punches, pretend punches. He called me all kinds of names: *zamel*, candy-ass, bitch, his little Leïla. I started biting him, biting him on the arms, the thighs. We were pushing and shoving. We rolled on top of one another, one of us crushing the other against the bed, the floor. This wasn't a game anymore. It was all about honor. Our honor as men. The honor we'd have to live with tomorrow. (ibid, 24)

The novel establishes a form of Moroccan masculinity through a shift, either literally in the sexual act or metaphorically through the shift between different parts of Abdellah Taïa's life. This first chapter of the novel is entitled "I remember," and it recalls what was impossible, which is the presence of queer Moroccan masculinity in tandem with a heterosexual dominant masculinity that shames *zwamel* (زوامل), homosexual men. Yet, challenging Chouaïb's perspective raises doubts about this impossibility and opens up a literary arena for Abdellah to offer his own interpretation of Moroccan masculinity.

To create queer masculinity, Abdellah consumes the masculine paradigm represented by Chouaïb and the men he has encountered and, instead, queers the Moroccan ideal of masculinity. Once he learns to claim his sexual and gender identity, and once Chouaïb recognizes him, the chapter ends.

The protagonist no longer remembers. Rather, he tells his current story, in which he places queer Moroccan masculinity at the center of his performance. Abdellah places this masculinity at the heart of the novel, sidelining the heteronormative discourse, and although the community around him remains firmly anchored in its traditions and norms, he eventually succeeds in taking on the role of a leader.

In the first chapter of the novel, Abdellah Taïa summarizes his ordeal and his struggle to assert his homosexual identity. In this way, he embeds the idea that the pursuit of constructing that identity, while fraught with tragedy and sadness, is a sparse part of his purpose as a homosexual man. The resistance he has shown against Chouaïb is his opposition to Moroccan society as a marginalized individual. During the presentation of one of his novels in 2011 at the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco, Taïa said enthusiastically:

> The role of literature is to be the voice of the voiceless and to make a world that does not exist or does not exist for some become existent. If my books manage to change the image of homosexuality in the minds of Moroccans, I will be happy. *Mitli*, homosexual, *mitli*, the one who loves another person of the same sex. This word, invented in the Arabic language four years ago (meaning in 2007), notably by *Kif Kif*, is a huge victory. (Zaganiaris 2012, 153, brackets mine)[57]

Kif Kif (كيف كيف) is an expatriate Moroccan association that campaigns for homosexuals' rights in Morocco. In *Darija*, when Moroccans say that two things are *kif kif*, they mean

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[57] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "Le rôle de la littérature est d'être la voix des sans voix et de faire exister un monde qui n'existe pas ou n'existe pas pour certains. Si mes livres arrivent à changer l'image de l'homosexualité dans la tête des marocains, je serai content. *Mitli*, homosexuel, *mitli*, celui qui aime le même que lui. Ce mot, inventé dans la langue arabe il y a quatre ans, notamment par *Kif Kif*, est une victoire énorme."

that these things are similar. Another Moroccan expression meaning *kif kif* is *bhal bhal* (بحال بحال).

Asserting homosexual identity in Morocco is a demanding and arduous journey. Abdellah Taïa is constantly throwing the stones of homosexuality into the stagnant waters of heteronormative Morocco, making it ripple. The challenge that Taïa took entreats the reader to imagine the suffering he was enduring when he was in Morocco as a homosexual citizen, on the one hand, and when he now travels to Morocco as an author accused of *fisq* (فسق) (debauchery) because he is homosexual and proudly admits it, on the other hand.

VII. Speaking Queer in Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*

Guapa is a novel written by Saleem Haddad in 2016. The story depicts 24 hours in the life of the protagonist, Rasa, who is a young homosexual man living in an unnamed country in the Middle East. Against the backdrop of violent protests and political upheaval, Rasa struggles to come to terms with his sexuality and his place in a society that never accepts sexual diversity. The novel explores themes of identity, belonging, and the impact of political disquiet on individuals and communities. It is a powerful literary work that sheds light on the complexities of Middle Eastern life and on the challenges faced by homosexual individuals.

VII.1   The Novel, Society and the Arab Spring

Guapa is a novel that exudes classicism on every page. The portrayal of Arab society is strikingly realistic, raw, and credible, immersing the reader effortlessly in the narrative. Through the protagonist Rasa, we witness the layers that make up the reality of a homosexual man and the day-to-day struggles of a world that can seem strange and distant but is, in fact, neighboring, close, and shared. Following the death of Rasa's father and his mother's departure from a world that never suited her, Teta, his grandmother, becomes his only family member. When she wakes up one morning to the *muezzin*'s (مؤذن) call to prayers, she discovers Rasa in bed with another man, Taymour. In that moment, reality crashes into a home and a society with unbending moral codes. The grandmother locks herself in her room, and Rasa departs from the house without a clear idea of what will unfold next.

Saleem Haddad delves deeply into Rasa's memories, where he secretly explores his sexuality through the music of George Michael and the erotic films from Polish broadcaster Polskasat. Rasa longs to belong somewhere, anywhere. Saleem Haddad's

novel is poignant and eloquent, pushing the boundaries of intimacy in its portrayal of love, both physical and platonic. With raw and powerful language, Haddad challenges preconceived notions that homosexuality is a disease imported from the West, acknowledging the centuries-long existence of diverse sexual practices worldwide.

The reader is gradually imbued with the story until they feel like young Rasa. The family, Rasa's closest circle, is perhaps the one that shapes his personality the most. The mysterious disappearance of his mother, the traumatic death of his father, and the overbearing presence of his grandmother have made him an insecure, fragile man who must guard his innermost secret in a hostile family environment. His friends are his sanctuary, most notably Maj, a young man who writes sharply against the dictatorial regime in the country and likes to perform in the basement of the Guapa Pub, a hip place where gay, lesbian, trans, and bisexual people meet secretly. There, the love between Rasa and Taymour is born, a passion doomed to develop in secret, as Rasa is always afraid that morality, religion, or the law—which are amalgamated in this country—will put an end to it.

Beyond this circle, Rasa works as a translator, particularly for foreign journalists covering the political reality of his troubled country. This allows him to accompany an intrepid American reporter to interview an opposition leader fighting the President. This brings us to Rasa's social, political, and historical accounts. The novel portrays an Arab country that has experienced an attempted revolution but is controlled by a highly authoritarian regime. Rasa remembers the illusion of change that brought people onto the streets and how quickly it turned into disappointment. Reminiscing about his college years in the United States at a time that coincided with the 9/11 attacks, he became Arab for the first time, understood Otherness, and felt different. As the most important

relationships in his life threaten to fall apart, Rasa must find his place in a society that may never accept him.

Saleem Haddad was born in Kuwait City in 1983 to a Palestinian-Lebanese father and a German-Iraqi mother. With the Gulf War in 1991, his family had to flee to Cyprus, eventually settling in Amman, Jordan. Haddad later moved to Canada to earn a university degree in economics, which led him to work as a staffer for Doctors Without Borders and other organizations in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Tunis, Iraq and Egypt. Saleem Haddad moved to London and has written numerous articles for various magazines such as *The Baffler*, *Slate*, *Lithub*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (*LARB*) and *The Daily Beast* while living in Southwest Asia. In 2016, Haddad was named one of the top hundred Global Thinkers by *Foreign Policy* magazine. He also won the 2017 Polari First Book Prize for his novel *Guapa*. In October of that year decided to move to Lisbon, where he still lives, to try to position himself in discourses on minorities and multiculturalism before writing and directing his short film *Marco*, premiered in 2019. Several of Haddad's literary works including *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic* (2017), *Palestine +100* (2019) and *The New Abject: Tales of Modern Unease* (2020) have been anthologized.

Saleem Haddad is homosexual but was never able to express his sexuality openly until his twenties. Haddad's youth was deeply rooted in the underground night scene, where bars and cafes provided an open space in which it was possible for him to find his true identity. These spaces have been providing queer individuals "safety, visibility, and a sense of commonality" (Gray, Johnson and Gilley 2016, 29), argue Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson and Brian Joseph Gilley in their book *Queering the Countryside* (2016). Besides, Haddad only found clues to his sexual desires when he came into contact with English and American media, where he found words to describe what he was feeling.

Despite this, Saleem Haddad believes that the portrayal of queer Arabs and Arab nationalism in American and European media does not correspond to reality, and that the queer Arab community is being used for political purposes. This is the main reason why he wrote *Guapa*. In their book *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (2019), Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström and Tamara Shefer argue that "[…] Saleem Haddad use[s] themes of erotic desire and romance between men to frame the politics of cultural geographies beyond Europe and the USA" (Gottzén, Mellström and Shefer 2019, 227).

The novel bears witness to the topic of homosexuality by crossing cultural and geographical borders. In her article "Queering the Arab Spring: Belonging in Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*," Nadia Atia contends:

> In an interview for *The Guardian*, Haddad explains that part of his rationale for leaving the novel's location anonymous was to avoid 'expos[ing] any particular queer community to new scrutiny' (Cain np). But beyond this practical precaution, Guapa's lack of geographical specificity befits a novel that dwells in the interstices of several contested discourses. (Atia 2019, 54)

There seem to be other reasons why Saleem Haddad does not name the country where the events of his novel take place. I can argue that the fact that the novel's geographic location remains nameless points to the presence of homosexuality in the Pan-Arab context and of Arabs identifying themselves as queer within societies that purportedly prevent their sexual freedom. In *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (2019), Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone contend:

> Saleem Haddad unanchors his novel *Guapa* (2016) from a specific country to tell the story of a young gay man in an unnamed Middle Eastern capital during the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring. (O'Gorman and Eaglestone 2019, 144)

It would, indeed, be too simplistic to say that the absence of the novel's reference to any geographic location is merely an indication of Haddad's concern that a particular queer

community might be at stake. Rather, he prevalently advocates for homosexuals without being limited only to one nation. This means that, for Saleem Haddad, the war on queer subjects is ubiquitous across the entire Arab world.

The exclusion of homosexuals in the Arab arena justifies their existence in society even as a minority community. When speaking of Arabity, Islam presents itself as the primal pillar in the formation of social and cultural Arab rules, although there are large numbers of people who identify as Arabs but are not Muslims, such as Christians in Lebanon and Copts in Egypt. Above all, this shows that Haddad's transgression of geographic boundaries implies that the country he left unnamed is unquestionably Muslim. This substantiates Alexandra Simonon's take on Muslim attitude towards homosexuals in Arab societies by arguing in her article "Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East:"

> Fifty years ago, Muslims, Christians and Jews generally agreed that homosexuality was evil. While one could not say that Judaism and Christianity as a whole have come to terms with it, major bodies of opinion in these faiths have since moved forward and adopted a more tolerant approach to homosexuality. This is not the case in contemporary Islam, where, broadly speaking, there is no real debate on issues of sexuality. (Simonon 2006, 61)

This quote should not be seen as a description of Arab attitudes towards homosexuality, as Simonon does not mention any terms related to Arabs or people in the Middle East. Instead, her quote outlines people's perception of queer sexuality based on their religion at a transnational level. If Simonon had argued that non-Muslim Arabs accepted homosexuality, she would have implicitly suggested that their religion makes them fundamentally different from other Arab-Muslim societies, even if they share a wealth of cultural values. Nevertheless, Lebanon, as an example of an Arab country with a majority of Christian residents, still rejects homosexuality.

Lebanese people's perception of homosexuality has been tackled by a slew of authors. In his book *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics, and the Media* (2007), Andrew Hammond contends that "Lebanon prides itself on being the Arab world's most open society, but homosexuality is still regarded as perverted and immoral" (Hammond 2007, 43). English author Paul Doyle confirms, in his book *Lebanon* (2016), that although Lebanon is culturally open and tolerant, this tolerance cannot extend to the queer community, and does not embrace Western attitudes towards homosexuals (Doyle 2016, 81). Despite being an open culture, Lebanon has continuously threatened and arrested participants in a number of Beirut Pride marches since early 2017, and canceled their gatherings (Levine 2022, 162), as Mark LeVine claims in his book *We'll Play till We Die* (2022).

There is no doubt that there are Christian Arabs or Jews of Arab descent who do not accept the existence of homosexuality, but the most visible and widely mediatized dispute is between Islam and queer sexuality. The constitutions of most Arab countries are based on Islamic *Shari'ah* (شريعة) (Islamic Law). This mainly coincides with the formation of a high committee of *imams* and *ulema'* to ensure that the laws enacted are in accordance with the precepts of Islam. Rainer Grote and Tilmann J. Röder, in their book *Constitutionalism, Human Rights, and Islam after the Arab Spring* (2016) note:

> The tendency toward the adoption of constitutions based on religion, which focused on interpreting Shari'ah laws as one that narrows its application to Shari'ah penalties, has served as a means to gain political legitimacy and to form a national identity. (Grote and Röder 2016, 662)

National identity in the Arab world is composed of various elements, with Islam holding considerable influence. This implies that Arab values, ethics, traditions and habits are to some extent linked to religion. However, when viewed as part of society, these aspects no longer appear to be socially perpetuated solely due to religion but also because they

have become fundamental landmarks within that society. For instance, some Arabs may refuse to perform an act because it is considered shameful (*hshouma*) by their society, even if it is not explicitly forbidden by Islam. This leads Alexandra Simonon to deduce that in the Arab world, institutionalized homophobia is "first and foremost a political problem of which culture and religion are contingent factors" (Simonon 2006, 61).

Islam is the religion that influences most Arab countries, reinforcing the importance of some concepts already inherent in Arab society, which Halim Barakat, in his book *The Arab World* (1993), argues are family and procreation (Barakat 1993, 1). This worsens Arab society's attitude towards homosexuality, calling into question the two pillars that constitute it and consequently making homosexuality a taboo subject. The result is harsh laws that attack the existence of queer individuals. In his article "After the Arab Spring: A New Opportunity for LGBT Human Rights Advocacy?" (2013), Jayesh Needham illustrates how homosexuals are legally attacked in the Arab world and explains:

> As a result, several Arab countries have very strict, severe laws outlawing same-sex acts that proscribe prison sentences, lashes, and, in some cases, even the death penalty as proper punishments. Moreover, due to these strict laws, homosexuals are also subject to police entrapment, blackmail, torture, and have been banned from frequenting certain public establishments. (Needham 2013, 287)

Needham claims that the main danger faced by queer individuals is often within their own families. Arab families typically do not accept homosexuality, and when a family member's queer sexuality is revealed, it can result in both psychological and physical harassment and violence. This is often driven by the fear of perceived harm to the family's reputation and honor (*sharaf*).

In the case of *Guapa*, the family is embodied by Rasa's grandmother, Teta, whom he regards as a strong social authority with the power to dictate his actions. As she

becomes aware of his relationship with Taymour, he recognizes, through her reaction, that society's reaction to all individuals who defy heteronormative spaces of sexual orientation is relentlessly negative. This is bandied about by Joseph Massad when he contends that "it is the publicness of socio-sexual identities rather than the sexual acts themselves that elicits repression" (Massad 2007, 197).[58] Consequently, queer individuals become immediately marginalized and alienated by the hegemonic culture, which always perceives them as a minority community forced to live in obscurity and secrecy. Hegemonic power is not only discerned within its clash with queer individuals, but also through the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring began in December 2010 with the self-immolation of young fruit and vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi in the central Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid. This suicide sparked massive demonstrations and protests, first across Tunisia, then in Egypt, and finally shook other Arab countries. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets, protesting against dictators and autocratic rulers and demanding social justice, freedom and dignity. In Tunisia and Egypt, the longtime rulers Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosny Mubarak were overthrown.

In his book *The Failure of the Arab Spring* (2016), Bahraini author Khalifa A. Alfadhel discusses the etymology of the term 'Arab Spring' and how it historically fits with past revolutions and uprisings in Central Europe.:

> *Foreign Policy* commentator, Marc Lynch, was arguably the first to use the term 'Arab Spring' as early as January 2011 […] However, the origin of the term dates back well before the spark of the uprisings in Tunisia. It goes as far back as 1848, when the people of Central Europe revolted against political absolutism in what was known as the Springtime of the Peoples. (Alfadhel 2016, 28)

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[58] See also (Joseph, 1999), (Accad, 1978) and (Ginat, 1997).

The Springtime of the Peoples and the Arab Spring share similarities in their origins: both arose from widespread discontent with rulers and governments, from a desire for political democracy, and because the revolt was not confined only to one country but was rapidly spreading to other neighboring countries, which is consistent with Micheline R. Ishay's belief in her book *The Levant Express* (2019) that:

> [t]he rise and regression of the Arab Spring, which follows the pattern of other historical contagions, have more in common with the revolution of 1848 than with that of 1989 (which broke out in Romania). (Ishay 2019, 14, brackets mine)

In the West, the Arab Spring was celebrated and labeled as the struggle of Arab youth for freedom, democracy, and self-determination, and its protagonists were showered with prizes and honors. However, hopes for a political turnaround were dashed as only Tunisia had an ongoing democratization process, which, however, did not bring about significant improvements in Tunisian people's living conditions. In most countries, people could not make any real progress, and in some areas, life is worse today than it was before the Arab Spring.

The Middle East and North Africa are currently experiencing widespread conflict, with instability and uncertainty prevalent throughout the region. The population is rapidly growing, and unemployment, particularly among young people, is high, with a bleak economic outlook. The income and wealth gap between the EU and North Africa continues to widen each year, while the debt of North African countries is increasing, resulting in their growing dependence on international creditors such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Politically, the region is dominated by authoritarian states and repressive systems, such as the military regime in Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, which have consistently undermined any efforts towards democratization and have actively suppressed popular uprisings.

The Arab Spring also ended in fiasco in Syria and Yemen. There, devastating wars claim countless human lives, destroy cities and infrastructure, and force millions of people to flee. In *The Syrian Refugee Crisis* (2022), Danilo Mandić argues that "as of January 2022, the UNHCR registered 5,409,051 Syrian refugees" (Mandić 2022, 38). Most of them live in huge refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

The military intervention by foreign powers in the Middle East has not only failed to bring stability but also prolonged people's suffering. In countries such as Yemen, Libya, and Syria, the conflicts have been fueled by regional powers vying for dominance in the region. For instance, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party, Turkey has emerged as a protecting power for the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, Russia has expanded its influence in Egypt, sent mercenaries to Libya, and propped up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Iran, on the other side, has established a Shi'ite arc from Tehran through Iraq to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Finally, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a hegemonic power in the region, enjoying strong support from former U.S. President Donald Trump.

Several prerequisites were lacking in the countries of the Arab Spring, showing that the beginning of a transformation process could not rely solely on free elections. Free trade unions, independent media with competent and courageous journalists, the founding of new parties, and, above all, committed women have been the real prerequisites for democratic transformation. Without a fundamental change in gender relations, the Arab world cannot have a brighter future. In the foreword to their book *Arab Spring Then and Now* (2017), Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn and Kim Sengupta stress the failure of the Arab Spring and affirm that the hopes of those who rebelled against the despotic rulers turned into chaos:

> Initially the world hoped for positive change—democracy, free
> elections, and human rights. But, by 2012 the Arab Spring had

> morphed into "Arab Winter" bringing death, destruction, and despair. (Fisk, Cockburn and Sengupta 2017, 1)

In Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*, Rasa's ordeal coincides with the Arab Spring and the political instability of the countries involved. It conjures up an elusive rebellion hidden behind the visible revolts against autocratic leaders. Deductively, Rasa's Spring must have started long before the Arab Spring, but because Rasa and queer individuals are seen as part of a marginalized community unable to assert their rights, their revolution may struggle to gain momentum. What Rasa is spearheading is a social queer Arab Spring whose main aim is to vanquish the social and cultural norms that view queerness as deviant sexuality and exclude it from the accepted Arab catalog of sexuality.

Amidst political turmoil, *Guapa* candidly addresses the challenges of a sexual orientation deemed illegal and exposes the hidden truths of a love too intense to be silenced. Without seeking to provoke laughter or tears, Saleem Haddad provides a compelling view of a universal matter from a Levantine standpoint. He sheds light on a subject that only few have dared to address, merging the themes of religion and sexuality, two spheres that clash in one of the most intricate regions of the world, in the context of the contemporary post-Arab Spring era.

VII.2   The Novel's Anglophone Voice

The cultures of the Arab world have long been represented in Arabic literature. Although the Arab world is heterogeneous, this diversity has, in recent years, given rise to a phenomenon of diversification across different areas. One such area is Arab-Anglophone literature, which refers to the works of authors of Arab descent who produce literature in English. However, according to Claire Gallien, in her article "Anglo-Arab Literatures," these authors "do not necessarily live in an Anglophone country and do not necessarily possess the American, British, Canadian, or Australian nationality" (Gallien

2017, 5). Arab authors who write in English are often part of the diaspora, having found refuge in a non-Arab country, and use English as a vehicle to narrate their experiences.

There are a variety of reasons why some Arab authors have chosen English as the language for writing their novels. Majed Alenezi's book *Shifting Perspectives of Postcolonialism in Twenty-First-Century Anglophone-Arab Fiction* (2022) delves into the fundamental factors that lead an Arab author to prefer English to Arabic in the process of creating fiction. He explains that Arab-Anglophone literature started to thrive after the 9/11 attacks in the United States (Alenezi 2022, 8).[59] He continues his discussion by referring to English scholar Geoffrey Nash's interpretation of the prosperity of Arab literature expressed in English:

> [Nash] attributes the shift to a series of factors. First, translated Arabic novels fail to meet the expectations of a Western readership. The second factor for the rise of work by Arabs writing in English, according to Nash, is "embedded in the traumatic politico-cultural crises […]" The third factor related to the rise and success of Arabs writing in English is "the internationalization of literatures […]" (ibid, 9-10)

Layla Al Maleh, considered the first to draw attention to Arab-Anglophone literature, wrote her seminal book *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009) to communicate the historical twists and turns of Arab-Anglophone literature and the body of Arab creative writing in English. She strongly believes that for years, postcolonial studies have not given sufficient importance to Arab-Anglophone literature, instead focusing more on India, the Caribbean, West Africa, and South Africa. She argues that even Edward Said, who is credited with pioneering postcolonial theory, overlooked Arabic literature in English expression when he wrote an article on Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (Al Maleh 2009, ix). She goes on to argue that:

> The description implied by this adjective 'anglophone' does not simply provide a linguistic 'shelter' for the Arab writer in

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[59] Throughout his study, Alenezi refers to Geoffrey Nash's *book The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language 1908-58*, (Nash, 1998, 5).

> English. What the label also achieves is a much wider umbrella under which certain themes and concerns can be shared. Born away from the homeland, Anglo-Arab literature is haunted by the same 'hybrid', 'exilic', and 'diasporic' questions that have dogged fellow postcolonialists. (ibid, x)

It is reasonable to claim that Arab-Anglophone literature not only portrays the Arab experience or presents fiction in English, but also delves into the characteristics and nuances that define diasporic Arab identity. Moreover, it serves as a bridge between two cultures and testifies to the dual identity of the writer who experiences the risk of two cultures clashing over different languages, traditions and morals.

Arab-Anglophone literarture, written in English, offers insights into Arab society, relationships between people, and shared experiences, presenting a sociolinguistic modality of contact between languages. As Arabic was in constant contact with English as a colonial language, this contact has led to a diverse literary production. Arab-Anglophone literature is pluralistic because literary production has been closely tied to cultural identity. Furthermore, this literature shapes the representation of a socio-cultural space. Arab-Anglophone literary texts are imbued with memories and imaginations that express the movement between asserting one's self and the convergence with the English language:

> Indeed, one cannot fail to detect a note of jubilation, a certain delight in being able to negotiate boundaries beyond the spaces of their birth-place, an in-dwelling contentment quite unlike the expressions of pain and agonizing dislocation that characterize postcolonial hybridity of late. (ibid, 4)

In Arab-Anglophone literature, representation inspires an optimistic tone in Arab authors' writing. This positive tone is incongruent with that in postcolonial writing, as these authors do not write in English due to cultural and intellectual disagreements with colonialism. Instead, they write as Arab agents, addressing a wide English-speaking readership and defending their case with Westernized arguments. Another characteristic

of Arab-Anglophone literature is that Arab authors do not use it to counter or stigmatize a foreign culture or society. On the one hand, it is used as an external means to capture relevant discourses related to the text but is geographically distant. On the other hand, it is used as an internal tool to address issues that are typically part of the society to which the author belongs.

There are many Arab authors who write in English. They use it as an attempt to reshape Arab society by emphasizing the presence of a group of writers who belong to the Arab world because they have Arab roots and are, to some extent, suffused with Arab culture, while at the same time not belonging to it because they do not write in Arabic. Speaking of one's attachment to Arabic, Claire Gallien states:

> [T]he degree of connection to the Arab country of "origin" and to Arabic languages, in the form of *fus.h.á* (classical and modern standard) and *'āmmiyya* (vernacular), varies significantly from one author to the next, depending on the desire and capacity of the author to maintain that link to the language. (Gallien 2017, 5)

Following Gallien, one could argue that the non-use of Arabic by Arab authors is a conscious decision. This deliberate neglection of Arabic is either due to a preference for writing in English or a lack of a foundation to write creatively in Arabic, including the use of metaphors, similes, and other stylistic devices while still effectively conveying their message. However, their writing is sometimes enhanced by the occasional use of Arabic words that convey ideas more powerfully than some English words. In "Thinking Past Pride," Dina Georgis notes:

> Alternately, writing in English exclusively would not allow the use of Arabic colloquial sayings of everyday discourse. The "solution" is interesting: English with Arabish, (which refers to Arabic written in Latin letters especially in online chatting). (Georgis 2013, 239)

In this way, the authors' Arab identity is not rejected but is occasionally employed as a reminder of their roots and cultural ties to their homeland. Nadia Atia supports this notion in relation to Haddad's novel:

> We might think of *Guapa* as precisely the kind of anglophone writing that embodies Ottmar Ette's concept of a literature 'which possesses no fixed abode in the sense of being translingual or transcultural forms of writing'[…] Haddad's use of both English and Arabic reflects the always contrived, 'evolving betweenness' that Suleiman attributes to anglophone authors' identities and which, he argues, characterises their texts. (Atia 2019, 54)

Arab-Anglophone literature should not be viewed as a canon that attempts to group works and texts with similar characteristics but as a heterogeneous mix of authors with diverse backgrounds and contexts. In this respect, new aspects are emerging in this literature, such as the queer aspect.

The definition of queer Arab literature can be reductionist since we need to take into account several specificities when discussing queer Arab identity. Hence, it is essential to consider the fact that when we label a text as queer, we load it with social, economic, and political sensibilities that are unique to the queer experience, and we acknowledge that this text deals with these specific issues in a particular Arab context.

Guapa is a novel that broaches Arab-Anglophone and Western queer literature. Saleem Haddad boldly manages to interweave the anglophone voice of the story into the complexity of the topic it explores. The novel clearly reflects the intersection of Queer Theory and Literature developed by Tyler Bradway and E. L. McCallum in their book *After Queer Studies* (2019). Bradway and McCallum contend: "Queer theory's interest in literary style is an interest in working through what kinds of relations between people can be figured" (Bradway and McCallum 2019, 39). Queerness in *Guapa* is understood through the amalgamation of Arab culture, English as a foreign language, and queer sexuality, creating an image that the reader unconsciously perceives. The novel thus

points to a dual literary space. It establishes spatialization from the outset and presents homosexual desire as one of the fundamental aspects of the dynamic tension around which the writing is constructed. This contrasts with Arabic literary works written to challenge love and sexuality among Arabs, who are still accused of maintaining a fixed image of Arab eroticism. This issue is discussed by Frédéric Lagrange in "Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature," where he contends:

> One of the most troubling flaws of works aiming to analyse Arab attitudes toward love is the portrayal of the Arab Muslim man as an unchanging monad, unaffected by time and place, unaltered from sixth-century Hijaz to twentieth-century Morocco or Iraq. (Lagrange 2000, 170)

Haddad endeavors to demonstrate that due to Arab culture's refusal to acknowledge queer identities, the social process that enables queer subjectivities to develop and be recognized as queer is initiated. In his article "Arab Queer Language," Jad Jaber argues:

> Language, as a predecessor for existence and not just a symptom of it, is a necessary component for the formation of subjectivities. Language can create a space for the unfamiliar to grow, as it can depict past and familiar spaces where the old is regurgitated as eternal, and the past as the inevitable future. (Jaber 2018, 10)

Subjectivity is the very state of our existence that permits us to acknowledge ourselves as individual subjects. When the lack of language as a fundamental component in the social process causes queer identities not to be recognized as subjects but rather as acts, queerness is then perceived as a deviation and a corruption of the norm.

Since Saleem Haddad uses both English and Arabic, this falls within the framework of characterizing the anglophone author's identities as always in-between. This in-between state makes diasporic Arabic writing hybrid. In *The Arab Diaspora* (2006), Zahia Smail Salhi argues that novels like *Guapa* should be seen as part of a new Arab literature that has the characteristics of both the country of origin and the host

country, but in fact, do not really belong to either (Smail Salhi 2006, 1). Following the model of hybridity proposed by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Arab-Anglophone literature becomes an important breathing space for the Arab diaspora, allowing writers to express the joys and pains of the diasporic experience, but also connecting new and old homes and identities.

Haddad belongs to the category of queer diasporic authors. This encompasses those who do not conform to the heterosexual norms imposed by their homeland but instead live in another geographic location where their queer sexuality is more accepted. Often, their writing is critical of their homeland's oppression of non-heterosexual individuals. In her book *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* (2020), Siobhan B. Somerville contends:

> Because "diaspora" is typically defined by the mass movement of
> a people from a homeland to multiple locations around the world,
> the term would seem inapplicable to "queers" [...] because they
> have never resided in a common place with a shared language or
> culture from which they were dispersed. (Somerville 2020, 201)

In this way, Haddad succeeds in introducing the queer into this breathing space created by hybridity. As Rasa grapples with his sexual desires and queer identity through the hybrid space, he can reflect on where and how he might fit into his homeland, searching for literal and figurative spaces and communities in order to be himself.

Saleem Haddad fits well within the definition of queer subjects presented by E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen in their book *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (2011), in which they argue:

> Queer subjects are not only performatively reworking
> themselves, but also simultaneously reformulating the property,
> attribute, qualities, or actions that surround them, for the essence
> of the performative (…) is the interplay between text and context,
> subject and environment, language and meaning. (McCallum and
> Tuhkanen 2011, 12)

Through *Guapa*, Haddad demonstrates that the use of the term 'queer' in Arab culture reduces it to a single identifier. Although Arabic has a range of words and terms for gay and lesbian identities that clarify queer identity in relation to the existing gender and socio-political hierarchy, Haddad chooses to write in English. This is because the queer Arab subject has been marginalized to such an extent that it has become indefinable, inextricable, and associated only with fear, violence, and shame. In Western societies, queer sexuality is treated with greater acceptance than in Arab circles. Consequently, Haddad adopts a Western language and moves beyond the Arab cultural norms that confine queer subjects to a completely hidden space where their voices are never heard.

VII.3 Inexorable Arab Rules: *Eib*, *Khawal* and *Kalam Il-Nas*

In Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*, language, shame, and a sense of belonging are integral to Rasa's construction of queer identity. The novel's depiction of the queer experience within an Arab context aligns with the genre of queer Arab-Anglophone literature. Furthermore, the novel contextualizes queer characters within the contemporary history of the Arab world. To fully grasp how queer Arab identity, especially that of Rasa, is constructed, it is necessary to deconstruct the narrative into its constituent parts.

The historical, economic, and social contexts shape the way queer Arab writers write and reflect on their experiences. The presence of patriarchal homophobia, state repression, and the use of shaming tactics as a weapon of social control are fundamental elements in the 24-hour period in which *Guapa*'s narrative takes place, while the novel's country is experiencing the tumultuous Arab Spring. In fact, these features become the very objectification of Arab identity. An example of this objectification is the aftermath of the Twin Towers collapse in New York City, whereby Arabs and Muslims were routinely targeted, and issues related to sexuality were exploited to create a victim that

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needed saving. In this regard, the suffering of Arab homosexuals is used as a tool to dehumanize Arab societies and justify war and occupation.

In Arab society, if an individual's queer sexuality is viewed as an identity, their agency is often ignored, and they may become a tool of colonial power. Saleem Haddad is cognizant of this phenomenon, and the characters in *Guapa* illustrate different perspectives on this dynamic. The novel interweaves Rasa's personal struggles with the political violence and turmoil that followed the Arab Spring in the unnamed country where the story takes place. Haddad portrays the national instability in the opening scenes with a sense of personal disillusionment:

> My head is spinning with the president's voice, the image of the headless bodies in the dirt, the thought of Teta spying on Taymour and me in bed. I look out from the balcony toward al-Sharqiyeh. A flock of birds hovers over the city, oblivious to the mess us humans are making, to the heavy ball of shame and fear in the pit of my stomach. An eerie quietness cuts through the usual sound of traffic and street vendors. Is this ominous stillness new, or have I only just noticed it? (Haddad 2016, 10)

The concern Rasa feels for Taymour, his lover, is inseparable from the horrifying images the government conjures up in his mind. Even Rasa equates his memories of the violence of the protest movement with his love and longing for Taymour. Rasa muses in retrospect:

> I pass the supermarket across the street from our building. It's the supermarket Taymour and I hid in when the snipers attacked a few months ago. At the time, we crouched in a nook between the entrance and a fridge filled with ice cream and frozen chicken. These days, walking past the supermarket brings back the screams of the crowd in my ears, the image of bodies dropping to the ground reflected in the broken glass of the door, and the feel of my face against Taymour's neck, hot and sweaty. (ibid, 12)

Rasa's attraction to Taymour is continuously linked to his memories. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate his struggle for personal freedom at home from the struggle for national freedom, in which he is involved.

Rasa's description of what he considers the most hopeful goals of the first protests reflects his personal situation of rejection of family harmony. He comments: "no more hypocrisy, no more fear, no more staying put and shutting up and selling our souls to political devils for the sake of 'stability'" (ibid, 10). Rasa, who would die for change if he could, recognizes that after the dictator's fall, the government that replaces him may not defend the called for values of freedom and democracy.

Rasa's dreams of a politically democratic country know no bounds. He opposes the absolutist regime that restricts freedom of expression and sews up public opinion. However, it implies that an external struggle for Rasa's and queer subjects' freedom cannot be envisaged. This means that Rasa finds himself in the position of having to champion both his country's liberation and the affirmation of his queer identity through his own efforts. In his online article "Gay rights and the Arab Spring," Brian Whitaker states:

> I think it's fair to say that while gay Arabs have been generally supportive of the Arab Spring, the Arab Spring has not been very supportive of gay Arabs. The activists among gay Arabs certainly see themselves as part of a broader struggle – which raises the question of how far they should set aside their gay activism while fighting for bigger and more immediate goals. (Whitaker 2012, 1)

When Rasa helps Laura, a New York Times reporter, interview Sheikh Ahmed and his wife Um Abdallah, he ponders the consequences of an Islamist victory over the existing regime. Rasa is forced to translate and thereby articulate the belief of Sheikh Ahmed, who claims:

> "For example, your men look like women and your women look like men. This is permitted in Western societies, even encouraged as equal rights," I hear myself explain to Laura. "So now in your countries you have men who sleep with men who look like women. This is like dressing a pig up as a sheep and slaughtering it so you can have some lamb." (Haddad 2016, 65)

Rasa explains: "I want to tell Um Abdellah that my best friend [Maj] is also being held by the regime for who he is, for who he wants to be, but I cannot find the words to do so" (ibid. 65, brackets mine). *Guapa* brings forth a world where denigration is anything but historical and where cultivating queer bonds is therefore crucial. Rasa and Maj are trying to assert their queer identity in a region where homosexuality can be punishable by death. This is confirmed by Frederic Martel in his book *Global Gay* (2019), where he claims that "about ten countries still officially maintain the *death* penalty for homosexuals in their laws" (Martel 2019, 192). Nevertheless, as Nadia Atia clarifies, some of the ways queer people are treated in Arab countries do not fall under these legally sanctioned penalties (Atia 2019, 59). This means that several parts of the Arab world do not carry out the death penalty against homosexuals. Although the enacted law provides for the death penalty for homosexuals, Arab countries only sentence them to prison, and sometimes declare them innocent (see the next chapter on Muhammad Abdelnabi's *In the Spider Room*).

From the opening lines of *Guapa*, Saleem Haddad confronts the reader with the concept of *eib* (عيب), which is all too often inherent in the experiences of queer individuals. Similar to *hshouma* in Morocco (as discussed in the chapter on Abdellah Taïa), *eib*—also used in Morocco—is one of the notions that leads Arab society to reject anything that does not conform to prevailing customs, traditions, or the common intellectual vision of individuals. The culture of *eib* is usually associated with the emergence of something new and unfamiliar, and is considered unacceptable because it conflicts with the cultural, social, and moral beliefs of Arab society.

Majed Alenezi argues that "the word *eib* is a multivalent term interlacing both cultural principles and social practices in the Middle East." (Alenezi 2022, 23). *Eib* has spanned generations and is laden with many ideas and legacies regarding the behavior of

each society and what is deemed acceptable or not, based on the particular outlook, customs, and traditions of that society. If we examine the behaviors considered *eib*, we find that criticizing them is deeply ingrained in the ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation. While some of these ideas have disappeared as a result of societal changes, many of them, particularly those related to sexuality, continue to be spurned.

Considering Arab society, we can find dozens and possibly hundreds of behaviors that Arabs condemn. For instance, even if a woman has a job and shares financial responsibilities with her husband equally, she is still expected to take sole responsibility for household chores because not doing so is deemed *eib* (shameful). If a man were to help with domestic work, he would likely do so discreetly, trying to keep it hidden from the surrounding community. Similarly, in the Arab world, there are countless forms of *eib* that mostly function as a building block for monitoring people's behavior and identifying actions deemed shameful.

In Saleem Haddad's *Guapa*, *eib* is presented as an unavoidable stanchion in Arab society. Nadia Atia notes:

> This key word defies straightforward translation, instead the novel offers us numerous examples of the ways in which the concept functions. Rasa explains that 'Taymour's name is embargoed under a cloak of *eib*. The closest word for *eib* in English is perhaps "shame." But *eib* is so much more than this. (Atia 2019, 56)

Rasa expounds: "*Eib* is an old cloak that Teta draped across my shoulders many years ago" (Haddad 2016, 25). He associates it with "*kalam il-nas*" (كلام الناس) (ibid, 25), meaning people's words, which are mainly told pejoratively in a gossip context. For Rasa:

> The implication of *eib* is *kalam il-nas*, what will people say, and so the word carries an element of conscientiousness, a politeness brought about by a perceived sense of communal obligation. (ibid, 25)

Kalam il-nas is omnipresent in Arab circles. People are constantly thinking about others and what they will say about them. For example, in the case of spouses breaking up, instead of addressing the problem, parents and family members are often concerned about what people will say about the situation. Even in preparing for weddings, the real joy of the ceremony can be overshadowed by the worry of whether people will be satisfied with the preparations and what they will say. In Arab countries, some people may be heedless about the impact of *kalam il-nas*, but its presence is undeniable. People fear others' words because it can lead to a tarnishing of their reputation.

Rasa meticulously points to some of the faces of what passes for *eib* in the Arab world:

> Teta hid her grief behind a pinched nose, a tight smile, and her ever-growing list of *eibs*. It's *eib* not to go visit the neighbors during Eid. It's *eib* to miss a wedding, even if you hate every minute of it. It's *eib* to pick your nose in public. Accepting a second helping of food on the first offer: *eib* ("Shoo, I don't feed you enough?"). It's *eib* to ask a woman how old she is or to ask someone what religion they are. It's *eib* for a young boy to play with Barbie dolls. I've come to realize that if worn correctly, the cloak of *eib* is large and malleable enough to allow you to conceal many secrets and to repel intrusive questions. For example, it's *eib* to ask me my girlfriend's name if I don't offer it to you first. (ibid, 26)

Far from Teta's norms, Rasa must learn what is considered *eib* in the Global North. At first, Rasa cannot get rid of Ray, his friend Cecile's alcoholic boyfriend because it would be "rude" to throw him out, but *eib* is more than just a way to limit one's own behavior. *Eib* is also a benchmark against which Rasa can measure the behavior of others and see for himself when he benefits from it. After Cecile has drawn a line in the middle of their meal together, she scolds Rasa for eating over the line and claims the rest of the meal was hers (ibid, 141). Rasa becomes furious:

> I was a greedy Arab, scolded for eating more than my share. But the meal cost six dollars, and it was obvious that Cecile did not intend to eat all of her portion that night. Who cares if I ate a bit

> more than my share? The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. Her street-rat lover had spent most of the fall semester sleeping in my bed without so much as lifting a finger, and she throws a tantrum because I ate an extra spoonful of rice? What a typical capitalist move. Even food, the most sacred of gifts, is sliced up and privatized. Cecile really is a petty bourgeois European, I thought, lighting a cigarette. But what could I say, really? There was nothing. Besides, forget about capitalism. More than anything, negotiating over six-dollar Chinese takeout was *eib*. It was the *eib* to end all *eibs*. (ibid, 142)

Rasa's encounter with Leila, an Arab friend, reveals his different attitude. His Arab identity, with its rules, language, and norms, make him feel at home. Haddad emphasizes that Leila's behavior towards food is completely different from Cecile's; she does not mind if Rasa eats more than his portion. Through his understanding of both cultures, Haddad connects and highlights the peculiarities of *eib* that frame different aspects of Arab culture.

Haddad discusses Arab society and its perception of *eib*, providing insight into a world where societal scrutiny is constant and meticulous. He aims to convey how Middle-Eastern society, which differs greatly from the Western perception of *eib*, perceives homosexuality. All forms of sexuality that deviate from the norm of marriage are considered *haram* and *eib* by Arab society. Therefore, Rasa's top priority is to fight against the deeply ingrained notion of *eib*, alongside the Arab Spring and the persecution of homosexuals.

Since a precise location in the Arab world where the story takes place is not given, *Guapa* opens up a transnational space that runs parallel to Haddad's linguistic choices. The plot of the novel takes place in various Arab and Arabic-speaking locations, but is not geographically anchored in any specific nation. This reflects the anglophone nature of the novel, which, although written in English, incorporates important Arabic words and phrases, though not always with translations or explanations of meaning in the

novel's footnotes, placing *Guapa* in the category of literature that Ottmar Ette, in his book *TransArea* (2016) describes as a literature whose nationality is not fixed (Ette 2016, 34).

Continuing the analysis of language use in the novel, Rasa narrates a past memory at school where his religion teacher is reciting the story of Prophet Lot. Then one of the students asks the teacher if the word *louti* (لوطي), used as an insult in Arabic and meaning "sodomite," came from the same prophet:

> One day someone from the president's office was visiting the class so the teacher was forced to give us a lecture. She told us the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose sins — which included homosexuality — had called down the vengeance of God, who punished them by raining fire on the cities. God ordered the Prophet Lot to escape and never look back. But as Lot and his wife escaped, his wife took one last look at Sodom and immediately turned into a pillar of salt. "That's why the Dead Sea is salty," the teacher explained. (Haddad 2016, 72-73)

Rasa tries to fit this new word into his identity:

> *Louti*. I went back home, turned on the faucets, and said the word in front of the bathroom mirror: "*Ana louti*." Sodomite. No, it was too religious. All it did was remind me I was going to hell. (ibid, 73)

Rasa's homosexual identity is constructed and underpinned by the language register associated with his sexuality. His exposure to settings where discussions about *liwat* (لواط) (male homosexuality) take place serves to invigorate his desire to pass for a homosexual man. Although the word *louti* is part of Islamic vocabulary, Rasa's homosexual identity does not change after learning the lesson behind Lot's people's homosexuality. Rather, he merely discards the use of the word and tends to overlook the religious teachings that forbid homosexuality, since for him, homosexuality is an immutable identity, as Suzanne Enzerink points out in her article "Arab Archipelagoes": "[t]hroughout, Rasa's future aspirations are intimately linked to sexual arousal" (Enzerink 2021, 264).

Although Saleem Haddad keeps the location hosting the events of his novel unnamed, I can assert that the country where the story is set is Egypt. To ensure a clear

understanding of Arabic dialects, the word 'Teta' that Rasa uses to call his grandmother is not her name. 'Teta' is the word used in Egypt and some other Arab countries to refer to one's grandmother. Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor, in their book *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present* (2018), argue that the traditional Arabic word for grandmother is *teta*. (Hary and Benor 2018, 398). Books such as Giuliano Bonfante and Larissa Bonfante's *The Etruscan Language* (2002), Nada Prouty's *Uncompromised* (2011), Carol Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature* (2014), Kate Moore's *The Husband Hunter's Guide to London* (2018), Michelle Hartman's *Breaking Broken English* (2019), and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Silverworld* (2020), all confirm that the word 'teta' is not a name but a word used in some Middle-Eastern societies to refer to the grandmother.

I also deduce that the story takes place in Egypt because Saleem Haddad tends to use another colloquial term to refer to the male homosexual, which is *khawal* (خول). In his article "Troisième genre et transsexualité en pays d'islam" (Third gender and transsexuality in Islamic countries), Corinne Fortier notes:

> [T]he word *khawal* in the Egyptian Arabic dialect refers to their
> (in reference to homosexuals) passive role in sexual relations with
> men. (Fortier 2020, see paragraph 13, brackets mine)[60]

Etymologically, the word *khawal* derives from *khawalat* (خولات), which used to refer to men who performed belly dancing. In her book *Beyond the Rainbow* (2021), Linda D. Rhodes writes:

> Indeed, Egypt has a rich homosexual history, ranging from the
> famous transvestite *khawalat dancers*, introduced when
> Muhammad Ali, the founding Pasha of Egypt, banned women
> from performing to the boy marriages evident at the oasis of Siwa
> on the Nile until the 1930s. (Rhodes 2021, 42)

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[60] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "le mot *khawal* dans le dialecte arabe égyptien se réfère à leur (en réference aux homosexuels) rôle passif dans les relations sexuelles avec des hommes." Brackets mine.

The women who were supplanted by *khawalat* dancers were called *ghawazi* (غوازي) and were banned from erotic public dancing in 1834 because, according to Lagrange, the belittlement of *khawalat*'s masculinity was less harmful to society and did not cause too much *fitna* (social disorder) (Lagrange 2000, 190).

Similar to *zamel* in Morocco (see the chapter on Abdellah Taïa), *khawal* has a pejorative connotation when mention of a homosexual man is made, and is used as an attack on his homosexuality. Additionally, Egyptians do not have a word to allude to the active homosexual man, as Egyptian masculinity is only considered downgraded when the male is penetrated. Lagrange also confirms the presence of the term *khawal* in Egyptian society when he refers to an Egyptian comedian "who sold many discs, among which one finds items such as *Khenaqat el-khawal ma'a l-mara* (a quarrel between the queer and the shrew) and *Ganazet el khawal* (the queer's funeral)" (Lagrange 2000, 170). Speaking of the Arab Spring, Egyptians who opposed the revolution used the word *khawal* to attack and contemptuously stigmatize the protesters. In her book *Women of the Midan* (2019), Egyptian writer Sherine Hafez points out:

> During the protests, male demonstrators were often described as homosexuals by pro-Mubarak supporters. The word homosexual, *khawal*, can often be heard on videos taken of security police taunting protestors. The threat of the loss of male privilege has such dire consequences that it is often used as a threat in violent confrontations with police. (Hafez 2019, 65)

Historically speaking, the term *khawal* is a label coined in nineteenth century's Egypt. The term can sometimes be used in other Arab countries as a reference to a male homosexual, but only as a borrowed word from Egypt, as almost every Arab country has a slang word used to refer to a homosexual man. Through the informal correspondance I had with native informants over the years (2021-2022), I was able to ascertain that in Algeria, the words used to refer to a homosexual man are *naksh*, *attay* and *hallaj* (حلاج); in Tunisia, *miboon* (ميبون); in Saudi Arabia, *mbasbis* (مبسبس) and *hawil* (حويل); in Iraq,

farkh (فرخ); in Yemen, *ba'sousa* (بعصوصة); in Mauritania, *snoussi* (سنوسي); in Libya, *kawal* (كول); in Syria, *sha'biyat* (شعبيات); in Jordan and Palestine *maniak* (منيك)[61]; and in Lebanon, *mithli*, which is the standard Arabic word used by all arabic-speaking countries. To my knowledge, Tunisia is the only Arab country that uses a word to refer to the active male homosexual. This word is *teffar* (طفار). This diverse array of terms used to derogate homosexual men in the Arab world aligns with the ideas presented by Brian Joseph Gilley and Giuseppe Masullo in their book, *Non-Binary Family Configurations* (2022), in which they argue:

> We are born male or female and become men or women: on this "transformative" process in all the few historical and among all peoples, men have built "narratives," social imaginaries, myths, customs, and institutions. (Gilley and Masullo 2022, 23)

Since *Guapa* is not explicitly located in a specific country, the contextual clues Saleem Haddad provides lead me to speculate that the story takes place in Egypt, a country that underwent the Arab Spring, where the term 'teta' is commonly used to refer to grandmothers, and a gay man is defamed with the derogatory term *khawal*.

Hamza, Rasa's classmate, verbally harasses and insults him using the word *khawal*. This was the first time Rasa heard the word. After he asked Hamza what that meant, he described Hamza's reaction and response:

> Hamza caught my eye and mouthed "*Baneekak*" — I will fuck you. He did not say this like it was a good thing. The look in his eyes made my cheeks burn with shame. *He will fuck me*. I quickly looked away. (Haddad, 2012, 74)

When Rasa attempts to understand the meaning of the term, he finds himself compelled to switch to English and inquire with Mr. Labib, their history instructor. The latter informs Rasa that "*khawal* refers to effeminate men" (ibid, 74) and tells him that it is no longer

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[61] The colloquial word *maniak* is taken from the French verb "niquer," which is a vulgar expression that can be used in a crude and offensive way. It is often used as a crude term synonymous with the English verb "to fuck," but it can also be used generally to mean "destroy" or "damage."

used to refer to male belly dancers. Rasa asks the teacher about the English equivalent of the word *khawal*: "is it used for gay" (ibid, 74)? Surprised, the teacher does not allow Rasa to use this English word again, but confirms the meaning he was questing:

> 'Don't use that word here,' he said, eyes narrowing. He licked his
> lips, stood up from behind his desk, and ushered me to the door.
> (ibid, 74)

Back home, Rasa stands in front of the mirror and tries to determine his appearance based on this Arabic word, and says: "*ana khawal* (I am gay)" (ibid, 74). He continues to ruminate: "Maybe I was a *khawal* […] Perhaps *khawal* was an aspect of who I was. A sissy. A girlie-boy. But it didn't encompass everything" (ibid, 74). Later, Rasa comes across the word *shaath*, which could be directly translated as 'queer,' meaning "strange," "unusual" or "different." The novel shows the reader how the term 'queer,' Arabic *shaath*, is widely understood in certain contexts as an offensive term for a gay man:

> I look at my body, like a prison. I live within this prison of
> contradictions that fight one another like stray cats in my mind.
> I'm neither here nor there. Not in America and not here. Each
> forms a part of me, and when they all add up, all that is left is
> *shaath*. Ana *shaath*. If said in the right way there was a ring to it.
> *Shaath*, allowing the breath to ride the aa in the center of the word
> like a lazy wave. Shaath It wasn't perfect but it was something I
> could work with, if on inflection alone. *Shaath*: queer, deviant,
> abject. Is it just my homosexuality that makes me *shaath*, or
> something more than that? (ibid, 184)

Unable to find a word that matches his identity, Rasa repurposes the offensive word *shaath*. Reflecting the appropriation processes that have shaped the term "queer" as we understand it today, Rasa seeks to redefine this derogatory term, revealing its status as an outsider and rejecting its negative connotations. He is determined to continue describing his identity in Arabic rather than relying on less offensive English descriptions. Although the English "gay" somewhat allows for Rasa's personal expression, he concludes that it does not accurately capture his sexual identity:

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> My obsession with finding the perfect word continued. It was funny that both English and Arabic have so many words that explored every dimension of what I was feeling, and yet not one word that could encapsulate it all. I suppose it's no surprise I became an interpreter, given my early days spent deciphering the meaning behind words in front of a foggy bathroom mirror. (ibid, 74-75)

Ultimately, it is the appropriate and reused version of the term *shaath* that Rasa chooses to describe himself, albeit not in the way it would be more commonly understood. Rasa adapts it to his needs and feels at home in Arabic terms, which he understands to reflect his own essence.

In this way, Saleem Haddad wants both the reader and the protagonist to learn the meaning of each of these Arabic words and urges them to be fully aware of their negative connotations. Nevertheless, when spoken in the dialectal register of Arabic society, the term *mithli* is not employed, as it is still perceived as a formal expression. With this in mind, I can conclude that Saleem Haddad wishes to convey the idea that in *Guapa*, as in the entire Arab world, homosexuality is never viewed through a formal lens. It is instead only associated with negative connotations and pejorative terms.

As we comprehend Rasa's identity through the narrative, we come to see Haddad's emphasis on the role of Arabic in the construction of homosexual identity. Rasa's reluctance to use the word "gay" at school and in social circles, as it is considered *eib*, creates a space for the affirmation of his *shaath* identity, starting with the pejorative term *khawal*. The presence of *eib* drives Rasa to delve deeply into the psychosocial dynamics of Arab culture. Questioning the "why" and "how" is the basis of his resistance to the social restrictions that curb his sexual desires and view them as *shadha* (شاذة) (deviant). The word *habibi* (حبيبي), which means "my darling" in Arabic, is commonly used between men and women when they are romantically referring to each other. It can also be used cordially between men, *habibi*, and women, *habibati* (حبيبتي), to show

familial or friendly love for a person. In *Guapa*, Rasa refers to Taymour as *habibi* to subvert the language that has always been used in a heterosexual Arab context.

By asserting his homosexual identity, Rasa begins to search for all that he missed from his childhood. He becomes fully aware that breaking the rules which society credulously abides by will help him discover his true self, connect his past to his present, and strive for the future he aspires to. He goes in search of Teta to break not only the shame that surrounds his sexuality but also the silence that envelops him. He is determined to find out the truth about his father's death, but mostly to express his anger at the silence that Teta has maintained regarding his stepmother's treatment, his mother's mental illness, and his abandonment at a young age. His suffering as a queer subject from social exclusion and shame leads to his social transformation, which Dina Georgis asserts, in addition to it being an intellectual or ideological process, "is also a response to the difficult and hard to name affects of social relationships and to the precarity of human ties" (Georgis 2013, 239). Only in this moment of clarity and self-revelation is Rasa finally able to ask Teta about the letters he is convinced his mother wrote to him. Confronting society, embodied by Teta, Rasa boldly says: "I'm done with your rules about what is *eib* and what isn't. I have my own rules now." (Haddad 2016, 251)

VIII. *In the Spider's Room*: Powers of Oppression and Resistance

In the Spider's Room is a 2017 Arabic novel written by Egyptian writer Muhammad Abdelnabi under the title *Fi Ghurfat Al-'Ankabut* (في غرفة العنكبوت) and translated into English by Jonathan Wright in 2018. Set in Cairo, Egypt in 2001, the story follows the ordeal of Hani Mahfouz, an Egyptian homosexual man, and the oppression he endures in twenty-first-century Egyptian society. Abdelnabi based his narrative on a real-life incident known in the media as the "Queen Boat" that took place in Egypt in 2001, when fifty-two men were arrested and detained on charges of practicing homosexuality—regarded as debauchery—under section 9c of the Anti-Prostitution Act No. 10 of 1961. This means that in early twenty-first-century Egypt, there was no law criminalizing homosexuality. This is confirmed by Maria Golia in her book *Cairo* (2004), in which she confirms that "[h]omosexuality is not illegal in Egypt, so the men were penalized according to laws prohibiting promiscuity and prostitution" (Golia 2004, 182). *In the Spider's Room* is considered the first Egyptian novel to take up the "Queen Boat" incident and feature a homosexual man as the protagonist.

VIII.1 The Novel, the Author and the "Queen Boat" Incident

A number of books in English and French have examined the "Queen Boat" incident, with the latest being Brent L. Pickett's second edition of his book *Historical Dictionary of Homosexuality* (2022). Pickett contends:

> A floating discotheque in Cairo popular with gay men, the Queen Boat was raided by police (on Friday, 11th of) May of 2001. Ultimately, fifty-two men were charged under Egypt's penal code. While the country has no formal anti-sodomy law, it does have provisions against "debauchery" that the courts interpret as forbidding same-sex sex acts. Authorities used police harassment

and torture, including savage beatings, in the Queen Boat and other cases in the first decade of the twenty-first century. (Pickett 2022, 233)

The court then ruled that 23 of the accused would be imprisoned for varying periods of up to five years, then, according to Joseph Massad:

In May 2002, the government, based on President Mubarak's refusal to ratify the sentences, overturned fifty of the fifty-two verdicts (including innocent and guilty verdicts), explaining that charges of the "habitual practice of debauchery" should have been considered outside the bounds of the State Security Court. (Massad 2007, 185)

It is worth noting that despite President Mubarak's decision to revoke the verdicts, two defendants remained charged with *izdira' al-adyan* (ازدراء الأديان) (defamation of religion).[62] Moreover, during the trial, a fifty-third individual, who happened to be a teenager, faced trial in a Children's Court and received the maximum sentence of three years in prison, followed by three years of probation.

Following this case, US-born activist Scott Long and Human Rights Watch published a book in 2004 entitled *In a Time of Torture*, in which they argued that the Egyptian government continued to arrest and torture men suspected of practicing homosexuality, and that the arrest and torture of hundreds of men revealed the fragility of legal protections of individual privacy and legal process for all Egyptians (Long 2004, see the preface of the book).

Although Hani is declared innocent, he emerges from the experience as a broken man. After losing the ability to speak, he realizes that writing is the best way to heal his soul. Hani finds a new voice in his notebooks and voluntarily isolates himself in a hotel room, which he shares with a small spider. Writing about his family, his own inclinations, the lost joys of the streets at night, and his humiliating experience during the months of

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[62] *Izdira' al-adyan* refers to any act or behaviour that offends religions and religious beliefs, and aims to defame religious symbols, values and sanctities of individuals or groups. The penalty for *izdira' al-adyan* in Egypt is found in Chapter 98 of the Egyptian Penal Code.

his imprisonment serves his search for hidden meaning behind all the rubble on a journey that does not follow a straight line. Hani is led in many directions, much like a spider's web, which he spins with a single thread that stretches from himself to others, from his present to his past, and from childhood delusions of love to the nightmare of loneliness and suffering.

Muhammad Abdelnabi Muhammad Gomaa[63] was born in 1977 in Dakahlia Governorate, Egypt and received an Azhari education until he graduated from the Department of English Studies in the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Al-Azhar University. After graduating, he worked as a full-time translator and later as a freelance translator to devote more time to writing. Abdelnabi is the founder of *Al-Hikaya Wa Ma Fiha* (الحكاية وما فيها) (The Story and What it Contains) workshop, which focuses on developing its attendees' literary writing skills. Abdelnabi wrote several collections of short stories, and his novel *Ruju' Ashshaykh* (رجوع الشيخ) (*The Sheikh's Return*) (2014) earned him the Sawiras Cultural Award for Best Novel by a Young Author. In 2019, Abdelnabi's *In the Spider's Room* won the Arabic Literature Prize established in France by the Arab World Institute and the Jean-Luc Lagardère Foundation.

In the Spider's Room portrays the life of a homosexual man in Egyptian society during the early twenty-first century. The novel comprises 39 parts, arranged in a fragmented order, drawing the reader close to and then away from Hani's narrative. The story begins with Hani and Abdelaziz walking hand in hand to a café for a drink near Falaki Square in Cairo. Unfortunately, this act marks the beginning of a nightmare that Hani endures throughout much of the novel, as the police arrest him and Abdelaziz on suspicion of their homosexual relationship.

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[63] In Egypt, people have their full names, including their father's, grandfather's, and great-grandfather's names, on their national identity cards. This means that there could be thousands of Egyptian men named Muhammed Abdelnabi, and to differentiate between them, they are referred to using their full names.

The arrest was Hani's first exposure to how he would commonly be described:

> The man in charge looked at me. "Are you *gay*?" he asked, using
> the English word and speaking rapidly in order to confuse me.
> "What does that mean?" I answered in a trembling voice.
> "Okay, come along with us, my dear, and we'll tell you what it
> means." (Abdelnabi 2018, 8)[64]

This quote highlights Hani's lack of self-perception as a homosexual man, which underscores the fear and confusion he experiences when confronted with an unfamiliar term. Prior to his correspondence with the police, Hani had never heard of the word "gay." This can be attributed to the severe restrictions imposed by Egypt, as part of the Arab world, to hinder openness to the Western world and universal dimensions of sexuality. Examining the original quote, we see that Abdelnabi wrote the word "gay" in its English form, suggesting that the authorities in Egypt possessed a type of knowledge that the general public lacked. The police then embody the hegemonic power that knows that a *shadh* is "gay" while the *shadh* himself does not know that his sexual orientation is universal.

Hani's sexual journey began at an early age when he was still a child. He was spoiled by his grandfather, who owned a tailor's workshop. After his death, the workshop became the property of Hani's father, which was shared with other workshops. At this new public market, Hani's father was always the owners of the other workshops. Since Hani was in the market, he always sat at a window facing a urinal, where he was invisible to his father and the other men: "That window allowed me to play my secret game" (ibid, 20). The game Hani is talking about is sniffing at men urinating and looking at their penises. "Furtively I looked at all these hamamas, doves, as they called them, and wondered what lay behind the name. Did they fly like doves" (ibid, 21)?

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[64] The original Arabic version of the novel was published in Cairo by Dar Al-'Ayn in 2017.

The market is where Hani first became acquainted with the penis, a central symbol of sexuality which he would later become deeply intertwined with. Though Hani was still at a young age, looking at the penis instilled in him an inescapable desire to expand his voyeuristic contact with it from a visual to a haptic encounter. This plunged him into a world that no one knew he loved, as his amazement at the penis went unnoticed by his father and his partners. Hence, this secret admiration was in his favor and the window that was his entry into the world of homosexuality became the trigger of his very first interest in men.

VIII.2 The Arab Penis and Hani's Homosexual Aspirations

The novel portrays the penis as a hegemonic device that is seen as the only source of desire. This construction of masculinity, which relies on the penis as a central defining factor, reinforces phallocentric thinking. It is important to note that the penis should not be considered the only source of pleasure and arousal. The narrative voice perpetuates a narrow typology of masculinity, where the sex organ is the sole determinant of gender identity.

The terms Hani uses to describe the penis provide insight into the dominant ideology present in the text. Male desire is emphasized throughout the novel, which reinforces the disciplinary notion that the male sex organ is a pleasure-producing machine. This construction of masculinity based solely on the penis is limiting and fails to acknowledge the diversity of male identities and experiences.

Hani's voyeurism is noticed by Ra'fat, who is happy flaunting his penis in front of him:

> No one noticed me spying except Ra'fat. Ra'fat worked as a cutter [...] He was the only one who noticed me snooping. In fact, he liked me looking at his penis but he pretended that he couldn't see me [...] His hamama inflated as though it were going to take off.

> Would it coo like the doves in the light well at home? On one occasion, he unexpectedly looked at me and caught my eyes feasting on the sight of his penis. I had been discovered. I anxiously expected he would complain to my father, but he never did. (ibid, 21)

Ra'fat plays a pivotal role in Hani's understanding of sexuality because he is the only person who spoke to him about masturbation and how pleasurable it was (ibid, 33), the only man with whom he finally discovered kissing (ibid, 34), and the first man to penetrate him (ibid, 38). The above quote highlights the common representations associated with the penis. It discusses how masculinity is depicted, hinting at an inherent and unchecked power to control, possess, and influence other physicalities. The name Ra'fat derives from the Arabic word *ra'fa* (رأفة), meaning compassion or clemency, but Abdelnabi's choice of the name cannot be related to the traits that Ra'fat exhibits. Ironically, Ra'fat is given such a name and is portrayed as the typical Egyptian man, valuing those masculine qualities, which are sacrosanct to heteronormative society. Hani's homosexual orientation is primarily based on the masculinity that Ra'fat exudes. In *How To Be Gay*, David M. Halperin underlines this connection, asserting: "Masculinity represents not only a central cultural value—associated with seriousness and worth, as opposed to feminine triviality— but also a key erotic value for gay men" (Halperin 2012, 306).

In Arab culture, the penis emphatically symbolises a man's *dhukura* (ذكورة) (masculinity), *rujula* (رجولة) (manhood) and *fuhula* (فحولة) (virility). In Arabic, the term *fahl* (فحل) (stallion) denotes the male of any animal that delights in strength. *Fuhula* encapsulates notions of power, dominance, and is primarily tied to one's *rujula*. In their book *Sexuality in the Arab World* (2014), Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon point out that:

> [...] the penis itself becomes the site of a condensation of all that signifies patriarchal masculine social power, whether in the realm of the sexual (men's domination over women), the familial (men's domination within the family) or the social (men's

domination within a society). Thus, the penis comes to *embody* social power, not just *signify* it. (Khalaf and Gagnon 2014, 143)

Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon explore the social significance of the penis in patriarchal societies, where it is considered a symbol of male power and authority. This extends beyond sexual matters and applies to male dominance in families and society as a whole. The quote indicates that the penis serves as the locus of power, representing and embodying patriarchal control in various domains of life. This reflects the social emphasis on and reinforcement of traditional gender roles and norms, where masculinity is associated with dominance.

The reader explores the intersection of two different masculinities through the depiction of the penis. Hani is unconsciously drawn towards Ra'fat, while Ra'fat deliberately exposes his penis in front of the young child, who is astonished by it. Hani's fear to have Ra'fat reveal his voyeurism to his father reflects his internalization of the Egyptian social norm of *eib*. Nevertheless, Ra'fat's conduct contravenes this norm, as it is widely regarded as highly inappropriate to display one's penis in the presence of others, particularly children.

Hani's secret encounter with Ra'fat takes place on a continual basis:

The next time he stood there, as soon as I could control myself and look at him, he gave me a slight smile and made a little nod as if inviting me to carry on playing with him, but I looked away, my heart beating violently. (Abdelnabi 2018, 21)

Young Hani is taken for a ride by Ra'fat who simultaneously embodies what Hani finds culturally *eib*, but sexually arousing. The quote appears to hint at Hani's longing for closeness and a bond with Ra'fat, yet with a persistent hesitance to yield to his voyeuristic inclinations. The phrase "my heart beating violently" confirms the level of Hani's excitement and arousal when exposed to Ra'fat's penis.

Ra'fat is the first man whose penis is described by Hani, but the latter speaks more broadly about the other men whom he met before:

> Even before Ra'fat, and before I started peeping at the penises of urinating men, I often imagined some man, a man I made up out of my fantasies. I tried to bury myself inside him. I curled up into a ball on my bed, as tightly as possible. I wanted to make myself so small that I could slip inside my imaginary man [...] On a few occasions this man was my father [...] His penis had extended a little with the flow of urine. I took hold of my own little hamama and tried to imitate him, but only a few feeble drops came out and fell right between my feet. He noticed that I was looking back and forth between my hamama and his elongated penis. He gave a little laugh. "Don't worry, Hannoun, when you grow up it'll get bigger," he said with confidence. (ibid, 31)

We can observe that the penis retains its privileged position in the sexual experiences of Hani with the other male characters in the novel. As an active and dominant entity, the penis serves as a means to contain the physicality of pleasure and power. The phallic descriptors, which employ language associated with power, reinforce the cultural notion that masculinity is associated with dominance, conquest, and destructiveness. The term "hamama," which refers to the penis, appears frequently throughout the novel.

In the Egyptian dialect, a plethora of terms are used to refer to the penis. The three most prevalent formal terms, used in Egypt and all Arabic-speaking countries, are *dhakar* (ذكر) (male); *al-qadib* (القضيب) (*el-qadib* in Egypt, as the Arabic definite article *al* is pronounced *el* in the Egyptian dialect), a non-scientific word signifying "penis," "rod," "rail," or "splint;" and *al-'odw at-tanasuly ad-dhakary* (العضو التناسلي الذكري) (the male reproductive organ), with *al-'odw* meaning "member" and "organ," and *at-tanausly* meaning "reproductive" and "genital." The penis is frequently referred to as *al-'odw ad-dhakary* (العضو الذكري). Egyptians are meticulous when it comes to assigning names to the penis depending on the context. The word *hamama* means "dove" in Arabic; however, Egyptians humorously use it to refer to the penis, especially in memes and social media

trolls. This choice originates from the belief that the penis resembles a dove in that both are perched on two eggs.

Egyptians continuously invent new terms to point to the penis. In informal usage, the term *beta'* (بتاع) is employed to refer to the penis, although its literal translation is "thing." It is normally used for possession, as randomly exemplified in the phrase "*El-ketab beta'y*" (الكتاب بتاعي), which translates as "my book" in English. This sheds light on how *beta'* signifies the penis from a possessive viewpoint and as an object. Another word commonly used in Egypt to denote the penis is *khazu'* (خازوق), which literally means "the stake." Historically, the stake was a method of execution and torture, symbolising one of the most heinous means of punishment, where a victim's body was pierced with a long, sharp stick from one side and taken out from the other. When the context is non-sexual, *khazu'* is used to describe unforeseen adverse situations. For instance, if an Egyptian person plans a trip but suddenly receives a call from their boss asking them to come to the office, they might exclaim: "This call came up to me like a *khazu'*." It is also meant to express suspicion in situations where, for example, a person might be invited to a place with the preposterous promise of gaining a huge amount of money, leading them to say: "I am sure that is just a *khazu'*." The plural form of the word is *khawazi'* (خوازيق), used when people anticipate unfavorable scenarios, prompting them to brace themselves for the worst and account for *khawazi'*, suggesting that they must have a backup plan in case things go awry.

Other words in the Egyptian dialect used to denote the penis are '*am ezzat* (عم عزت), *bulbul* (بلبل) and *ba'bus* (بعبوص), a word that refers directly to the penis and describes the middle finger when used to humiliate a person. *Hinkish* (حنكش) is another reference to the penis, but the most vulgar words used in Egyptian street context exclusively to refer to the penis are *zibb* (زيب) and *zubr* (زبر).

Arabic, whether expressed in its classical form or diverse in dialects, abounds with a plethora of vocabulary signifying the penis. Remarkably, all of these words carry masculine connotations. Recently, certain names which Egyptians have traditionally been reserved for men, such as 'am Ezzat (uncle or Mr. Ezzat) and Bulbul, have also taken on the additional meaning of referring to the penis. Therefore, in the context of an Egyptian street conversation, a sentence like "'am Ezzat is sick" acquires a dual meaning, leaving the listener uncertain whether it speaks about a real man named Uncle Ezzat or alludes to the penis. This linguistic pattern transcends geographical boundaries from the Mashreq to the Maghreb spanning most Arab countries. Within this broader cultural landscape, the lexicon associated with the penis incorporates numerous other terms that are typically associated with males. I have personally observed a noteworthy trend in Morocco, where the language used to denote the penis has gradually adopted designations that evoke authority jobs, such as *mqaddam* (مقدم) (the authority assistant) and *qayed* (قايد) (the province leader). Across the entire Arab world, however, there is a conspicuous absence of any feminine term alluding to the penis. The only exception is found in the Moroccan *Darija*, where the term *lahtouta* (لحطوطة) is employed, albeit specifically to describe the penis of a baby or a very young child.

VIII.3 Homosexual Identity, Hegemonic Masculinity and Corruption

It is noteworthy that Arab society tends to predominantly associate individuals with a specific identity, a trend that is promoted and reinforced by the media and institutional ideological apparatuses. These institutions, despite aiming to promote the generalization of identities, contradictorily emphasize the importance of individuation and psychophysical qualities that give each person a unique and exclusive character. However, Arab hegemony demands that individuals not be separated from their

collectivity. It is necessary to be one with the whole, as there is little room for different identities or for a departure from similarities. This generalization enables the domestication and shaping of identity (de)construction. Thus, unwittingly, individuals become subjected to the influence of authorities who shape notions of subjectivity and ultimately impose particular forms of individuality within the context of collectivities. In this context, Michel Foucault discusses the concept of "technologies of the self" which, according to him, are procedures that purposefully fix, maintain and transform identities (Martin, Gutman and Hutton 1988, 18).

In this sense, power governs the lives of individuals, conditioning them towards social passivity. When everyone accepts and embraces the same lifestyle, it becomes easier to monitor and regulate their actions, which often become predictable. This power constructs a truth about individuals in order to regulate and control them, for discipline shapes behavior in a desired order. However, within these processes, individuals find gaps that allow them to resist the imposition of these rules. There exist areas of conflict that have the potential to disrupt the ideological stasis enforced by rigid social structures, with ongoing struggles against predetermined subjective categories and assigned roles within the social network. In situations where these confrontations reach a critical point, the individual disentangles themselves from the socio-ideological constraints of sweeping generalizations, resulting in a state of exclusion and dislocation outside the established parameters of collective identity.

In the Arab world, this is the case of queer individuals who object to the standardization of sexual behavior established by their society, feeling excluded and without acceptance. Those who do not conform to prevailing sociosexual norms are subject to (de)construction in light of the social limitations and demarcations that

circumscribe the formation of subjectivities and identities, imposed by the cultural and ideological networks of society.

In his book *Identity* (2004), the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman defines identity as:

> [A] hopelessly ambiguous idea and a double-edged sword. It may be a war-cry of individuals, or of the communities that wish to be imagined by them. At one time the edge of identity is turned against 'collective pressures' by individuals who resent conformity and hold dear their own beliefs (which 'the group' would decry as prejudices) and their own ways of living (which 'the group' would condemn as cases of 'deviation' or 'silliness', but at any rate of abnormality, needing to be cured or punished). At another time it is the group that turns the edge against a larger group that is accused of a wish to devour or destroy it, of a vicious and ignoble intention to smother a smaller group's difference, to force it or induce it to surrender its own 'collective self', lose face, dissolve ... In both cases, though, 'identity' appears to be a war-cry used in a *defensive* war: an individual against the assault of a group, a smaller and weaker (and for this reason threatened) group against a bigger and more resourceful (and for that reason threatening) totality. (Bauman 2004, 76)

It is plausible to assume that feeling "out of place" everywhere, not fully integrated anywhere, and perceiving oneself as a stranger in the eyes of others, is a disturbing experience. This is because identities are floating signifiers, some of which are chosen by individuals, while others are inflated and imposed by larger and more powerful groups. Hence, individuals must constantly be on alert to defend their chosen identities against those imposed by the larger group.

Social, gender, sexuality, beliefs, in short, make up the subject's multiple incomplete identities. Recognizing oneself in an identity therefore presupposes affirming an interpellation and establishing a feeling of belonging to a social reference group. That is, when subjects identify with a particular socially accepted identity, they feel they belong to one or more social groups.

In the Spider's Room is a novel that tenaciously depicts the different dimensions of power, oppression and resistance. These terms are primarily associated with Michel Foucault, who wrote extensively about them. In fact, there is a relationship between life, resistance, and creation. Therefore, within strategic relationships, there are forces that resist and create. What resists power is the fixation of strategic relationships of domination and the reduction of spaces of freedom in the desire to direct the behavior of others. Such resistance must be sought within the dynamic of these strategic relationships. In this sense, life and living beings become an ethical matter, both resisting and creating new forms of life.

Resistance is not, then, a substance and is not prior to the power that opposes it. In an interview that Bernard Henry-Levy conducted with Michel Foucault in the form of an article entitled "Non au sexe roi" (The End of the Monarchy of Sex), Foucault argues that resistance is coextensive with power and that it is rigorously contemporary. For Foucault, resistance is not the inverted image of power, but it is as inventive, as mobile, and as productive as it (Foucault 1977).[65] In this respect, both resistance and power exist only in action, as a display of the relationship of forces, that is, as a struggle, confrontation, or war. Resistance must not only be conceptualized in terms of negation, but also as a process of creation and transformation.

Throughout the novel, Hani is fully aware of his homosexual orientation, but finds himself at loggerheads with political power, embodied by the police force, and cultural power, embodied by heterosexual society. In their book *Imagining Queer Methods* (2019), Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim discuss power and domination in relation to queer sexuality, claiming:

> Social scientists, and gender scholars in particular, have been
> charged to conceptualize power and domination in ways that

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[65] In the English translation of the article under the title "The End of the Monarchy of Sex," the idea I have discussed is on page 224.

> recognize how heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity disadvantage queer people and privilege straight folks. (Ghaziani and Brim 2019, 164)

The powers of oppression charge Hani, along with all men suspected of being homosexual, with practicing depravity. From the start, Abdelnabi, on the one hand, emphasizes Hani's fear of the outside world, which sees him and other homosexual men as strange subjects, and on the other hand, emphasizes his strong willingness to face up to this world with his *shaath* label. On his way to have a drink with his partner Abdel Aziz, Hani admits:

> Suddenly I had a whimsical desire to hold his hand. Something may have sent a shiver of fear up my spine, and I wanted to cling to him. It might have been the first time I had held his hand in front of people in the street, and the strange thing was that he didn't move his hand away or discourage me, as I had expected. We held each other's hands and my fear, which had no known cause, evaporated. (Abdelnabi 2018, 7)

This quote describes a moment of vulnerability and fear, and a desire for physical connection as a means of offering comfort to Hani, and a way of his publicizing homosexual display of affection. Hani's surprise at Abdel Aziz letting him hold his hand demonstrates Abdel Aziz's resistance to the heterosexual power that has long monitored them. This act of physical connection, though fleeting, has a calming effect on both of them as their fear subsides.

Egypt has always been a heteropatriarchal society that criminalizes homosexuality, whether through Muslim *fatwas* by Al-Azhar or by the Egyptian Coptic Church. For most Egyptians, homosexuality is a "terrible plague" (ibid, 28). This severe restriction on homosexuality has paved the way for varied responses. Many Egyptian writers and novelists have addressed homosexuality in their writings, including Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim and Alaa El Aswany; scores of Egyptian homosexuals have felt compelled to leave Egypt in search of sexual freedom in the West; others have had to

bow to society's impositions and continue their lives through heterosexual marriage; and others have had the courage to hold on to their so-called *deviant* sexual orientation, accounting for the dangers they are to be exposed to. This is intertwined with Yin-An Chen's take on the practice of freedom as resistance. In his book *Toward a Micro-Political Theology* (2022), Chen points out:

> What Foucault suggests about freedom of choice should be understood as a practice of the self because that is based on Foucault's understanding of the subject, the self, and knowledge. How can homosexuality become both the practice of freedom and action of resistance? When homophobic sexual morality dominates society, and even medical knowledge pathologizes homosexuality, the self is expected to be normalized through denying its desiring pleasure of homosexuality. Under this circumstance, resistance emerges when the subject chooses to self express as a homosexual and at the same time, allows the homosexual self (which is expressed) to constitute the subject. (Chen 2022, 115-116)

Hani's recognition of the potential consequences he might face makes the challenge more exciting for him. He knows deep down that asserting his homosexual identity within Egyptian society, which lies in wait to attack queer subjects, is his threshold to his identity construction. Holding hands with Abdel Aziz was so dangerous a step that Abdelnabi titles the first chapter "I clearly remember how the nightmare began." The disappearance of Hani's fear while holding Abdel Aziz's hands is indicative of the feeling he is sure to later experience if he takes the risk of coming out as a homosexual man. On the psychological level, this is substantiated by Avi Sion, a researcher into logic, philosophy and spirituality, who states in his book *Logical and Spiritual Reflections* (2008):

> Moreover, if a person *believes* he or she has no power of resistance to some impulse, his or her power of resistance is proportionately diminished. To act decisively, one has to believe the action concerned to be possible or useful. The beliefs one has *influence* one's will to act; one's beliefs are among the forces that affect (though do not determine) one's course of action. (Sion 2008, 371)

Hani and Abdel Aziz are arrested by the police as suspected homosexuals. Hani admits: "For a moment I felt guilty: maybe they had appeared out of nowhere to punish us just because I had reached out my hand to my friend and he had held it" (Abdelnabi 2018, 7). Although Hani feels guilty just for holding Abdel Aziz's hand, he shows no regrets for it. In the Arab world, guilt is implicitly associated with shame, as both are key to Arab culture and morality. In his book *The Psychology of the Arab* (2011), Talib Kafaji argues:

> Arab society is a shame-based culture. This is unique to Arab culture, and an individual must be mindful not to do anything that may bring shame upon the family or the community […] [it] is also guilt-ridden, because of [people's] adherence to ritualistic behavior established over thousands of years. (Kafaji 2011, 73)

The conflation of various systems renders Hani a complex subject within which vastly disparate and intense emotions coexist, including vehement aversion towards the cultural and social structures that censor him, fervent affection for men, and readiness to flout Egyptian norms of sexuality. Consequently, being different, specifically as a homosexual, is increasingly underscored in Arab society, where identities are so fragmented, established, and contested that novel identities emerge.

It is axiomatic in this regard that Hani only wants to assert one identity, namely his homosexual one. This is because he does not show his shamefulness about being sexually *deviant*. The flow and arrangement of the novel's chapters are fragmented, indicating Hani's split personality, which oscillates between societal constraints and psychological aspirations to enjoy sexual freedom. However, he never questions or doubts the authenticity or reality of his sexual desires towards men throughout the novel. His arrest, though filled with horrific memories, spurs him on to further process his homosexual identity construction. In his notable book *Questions of Cultural Identity*

(1996), Stuart Hall speaks about the relationship between power and identity assertion, which accurately reflects Hani's situation. Hall declares:

> [Identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more of the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). (Hall 1996, 4)

Upon Hani and Abdel Aziz's arrest on suspicion of homosexuality, Hani closely observed how Abdel Aziz resorted to bribing the police to gain the privilege of making phone calls. This option is not available to all Egyptians, as it requires access to power, financial resources, and strong social connections typically found among the high-class Egyptian society. Following this, Abdel Aziz contacted a lawyer who adeptly used rhetorical strategies to indirectly convey threats during his interaction with the police. This exchange escalated into a tumultuous and confrontational situation, leading to the intervention of the head of the police station. However, the situation took an unexpected turn when the police chief closed the case after learning the identities of some of Abdel Aziz's relatives. In retrospect, Hani reflected on this eventful episode:

> They didn't argue long, and so far Abdel Aziz hadn't been formally detained. No police report had been written and no grounds for detention had been cited. They didn't need any fuss or headaches over detaining someone from sucha family, and their scheme was still in its early stages. (Abdelnabi 2018, 28)

This quote highlights the perpetual oppression of Egyptians by the police. It is widely accepted that in Egypt, any crime, no matter how heinous, can be falsely attributed to an unknown individual if the actual perpetrator of the crime is wealthy, influential, or connected to powerful individuals within the country. A mere phone call or a monetary transaction can swiftly alter the merits of any case, effectively acquitting the actual wrongdoer. This is what happens with Hani; he is arrested along with his alleged partner, who is released while he remains detained. After Abdel Aziz calls the lawyer, Hani

apparently becomes aware of all that is happening: "Some of us managed to do likewise, but others, like me, didn't know anyone they could contact." (ibid, 27)

Abdelnabi sheds light on police corruption. Police appear to uphold morality and defend it against people and actions they deem immoral. Paradoxically, the Egyptian hegemonic power mainly punishes people for who they are and what their background is, and not for the crimes they committed. Hani speaks about this issue when he says that "all the non-Egyptians—Arabs and non-Arabs—were released" (ibid, 29). In this regard, one can posit that political power in Egypt experiences a decrease in its authority when faced with another power with greater dominance. Egyptians refer to this political immorality as *fasad* (فساد), which translates to corruption in English, and which was one of the reasons for their uprising during the Arab Spring in 2011 in the wake of the Tunisian Jasmin revolution.

The term *fasad* is omnipresent in the Arab world. Perhaps the right approach to understanding it is to observe the degree of institutionalization and ingenuity of its means and tricks, such that it is almost impenetrable to attempts to combat it, no matter how sincere and honest these attempts are. *Fasad* is commonly referred to as the abuse of public authority for private gain. Possibly, the most prominent causes and manifestations of corruption are apparent in many areas, such as morality and ethics, education, the policy of privatization, and the weakness of the judicial and legislative authorities and their submission to the executive authority. More generally, *fasad* is a complex phenomenon that includes imbalances affecting the political, economic, social and moral aspects of society that need to be addressed and remedied together.

In most Arab countries, *fasad* refers to the violation of public ethics, whether political, social, cultural, or economic. In other contexts, *fasad* refers to sexuality that causes *fitna* (disorder) or any act that is religiously or culturally unacceptable, such as

extramarital sex. For example, Moroccans associate the term *fasad* with sexual misconduct. In Morocco, *jarimat al-fasad* (جريمة الفساد) (corruption crime) automatically connotes crimes within a sexual scope. In Moroccan criminal law, *Jarimat al-fasad* is considered an exceptional crime. This is not due to its technical complexity or its significant impact on social and moral security. Instead, it is exceptional because, on one hand, it directly impacts individuals' dignity and honor. On the other hand, the legislature has specified unique criteria for establishing guilt in such cases, which deviate from the standard rules of evidence outlined in the Injunctive Relief Article and recognized by the law.[66]

Hani, whom the police accuse of spreading ethical *fasad*, tortures and humiliates him through their authoritarian *fasad* since they all agree that Hani is a "certified queer" (Abdelnabi 2018, 28), a homosexual man who is used to having sexual affairs with different men. He endures all kinds of torment from his very entrance to the cell of the police station:

> While they were taking us into the holding cell at Azbakiya police station, one of the informers or policemen came up to me, pulled a strand of hair that was hanging down at the back of my neck, and gave it a violent tug, jerking my neck back until I was looking at the horrible ceiling. "It's the first time I've seen this whore, though she looks like she's been around," he said, addressing his colleagues half seriously and half in jest. (ibid, 49)

The Egyptian Penal Institution, which is the place of detention, including central and public prisons, departments and police stations, is considered to be very masculine in terms of the perception of the body and the language. This gives the prisoner, who is regarded as highly *masculine*, a privileged position, allowing him to control other prisoners. This is highlighted by Hani when he confirms: "Then the orgy of beatings began, at the hands of other prisoners who had been ordered to attack us" (ibid, 145). The

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[66] See chapter 490 of the Moroccan Criminal Code.

intensity of the orgy reached such a level that Hani eagerly anticipated its cessation to escape the physical punishment inflicted upon him. Its imminent end was evident to him at the moment when he no longer had to fend off the blows to his head.

This intense display of masculinity extends its reach over the way one speaks. It aims to prevent any male prisoner from speaking in a soft voice, even if it is his own, or using terms that indicate "weakness" from the point of view of Egyptian culture. This includes the use of some English terms in the middle of the conversation or uttering Classical Arabic words, or words that subtly suggest social welfare. In order to insult a prisoner, his fellow inmates liken him to a woman, calling him *mara* (مرة) (the colloquial Egyptian word for a woman).

Within the confines of Egyptian prisons, derogatory language is always used to demean and attack the masculinity of homosexual men. These expressions include *hagg* (حاج), a typically Egyptian pronunciation of the Arabic word *hajj* (حاج), which usually denotes an elderly man as a sign of respect, or a man who has gone on pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. However, in prison, the word is used to denigrate the male prisoner by insinuating that he is sexually impotent, as elderly men are mostly sexually so. The word *'agala* (عجلة), which translates as "bicycle," has recently begun to be used to refer to a homosexual man; it used in the same context of the Moroccan word *pikala. Byetba'* (بيتباع) suggests that a man can be "sold" and is euphemistically used to imply that he can be penetrated. *Gada' meery* (جدع ميري), humorously inverting the true meaning of "authority guy," derogatorily alludes to the individual as an inferior homosexual man.[67] Hani is no exception and is subject to all kinds of humiliation. This is evident in his tone

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[67] In Egyptian culture, the colloquial word *meery* is a borrowed word from the French word 'mairie,' which refers to the town hall or administrative building where the municipal affairs of a town or city are managed. It is the place where local decisions are made, municipal services are managed and where citizens can obtain information, administrative services and carry out all procedures related to the daily life of the municipality. *Meery* is used by Egyptians to describe someone working with the police or the military. Sometimes, it is used to refer to the job uniform of policemen or soldiers.

when reporting the speech of a kind officer who tells him that he has to be strong and brace himself for whatever is about to happen (Abdelnabi 2017: 52). In women's prisons, the matter is not much different, as the prisoner with lesbian tendencies is beleaguered with disgraceful expressions. The most famous of these terms are *markuba* (مركوبة), meaning "ridden" and is used in the same context of *'agala*; *hayga* (هايجة), a word used to describe a woman who is hypersexual, randy and promiscuous; and *sharmuta* (شرموطة), the Egyptian street word to describe a "whore" (Wynn 2018: 133).

The Egyptian prison controls sexual desire, particularly among homosexuals, by banning newspapers and magazines containing sexually provocative images; by broadcasting only local TV channels showing football matches and news about national projects; and by leaving lights on at night as a form of surveillance and censorship. Regarding individuals, it is forbidden for two male or female prisoners to sleep in one bed, either during the day or at night. Conversely, those who engage in behavior contrary to prevailing male logic are rejected by other prisoners, distanced from them, stigmatized with demeaning terms and descriptors, even deprived of their share of food and forced to do heavy labor such as mopping bathrooms, doing the dishes, and washing vegetables.

Hani's experience of oppression in prison becomes evident when he is branded as a "whore." This label serves a dual purpose in demeaning him. Firstly, it highlights what is seen as his ethical and moral deviation because of his identity as a homosexual man. Secondly, by employing a derogatory term typically directed at women, society places him in a category associated with female vulnerability, thereby exacerbating the degrading nature of this characterization. Hani acknowledges this act of disparagement when he says:

> In the morning the guards took us out and ordered us to strip down
> to our underwear. They stopped in front of one man who looked
> unusually effeminate and ordered him to take off all his clothes,
> possibly to make sure they didn't have a real female as a guest in

their cells. (ibid, 144)

Arab society holds a harsh grudge against effeminate men. The cases of the man imprisoned with Hani and Abdellah in Taïa's *An Arab Melancholia* illustrate the Arab attitude towards men who do not exhibit masculine traits. These traits are both behavioral and physical. In Arab society, if a man exhibits masculine behavior but has long nails, long and styled hair, trimmed and shaped eyebrows, and fully-shaved beard and legs, he is likened to a woman. Similarly, if he has a beard, medium-length hair, hair on his body, but wears tight clothes, speaks and laughs in a feminine voice, walks sensually, and behaves softly, he is also likened to a woman. Hani describes how Egyptian society associates underwear colors with a man's level of masculinity and how he is treated accordingly:

> I knew that if they found anyone in colored underwear they beat them and humiliated them especially brutally, on the grounds that this was irrefutable evidence that they were effeminate. They laughed throughout the process and their tone of voice was surprisingly triumphalist. With each new pervert that stood in front of them for them to play with, their sense of their own virility seemed to rise, until it reached stratospheric levels. (ibid, 51)

Effeminacy standards in Arab culture differ from those in the West. For Arab men, the *right* style and color of underwear is indisputable. In the past, many men did not wear underwear on the basis that it would squeeze their crotch and lead to their sterility or low levels of virility. When they started wearing it, it had to be large and white, considering that these conditions would preserve their *rujula* (masculinity) when they were with other men, which is the social circle, and *fuhula* (virility) when they were with their wives, which is the heterosexual realm. This clearly goes in tandem with Malek Chebel's emphasis on a man's virility in the Arab-Muslim world when he asserts in her book *L'imaginaire arabo-musulman* (*The Arab-Muslim imaginary*) (1993): "Virile power, the core of which would be the penis, underlies certain representations of identity in the male

Muslim" (Chebel 1993, 333).[68] In the novel, the triumph felt by prison guards as they mortify the man in colored underwear echoes that of Chouaïb in Taïa's *An Arab Melancholia*. Both feel that their masculinity will be at its zenith if they succeed in hurting, whether mentally, physically or sexually, the man that society regards as effeminate.

In Egyptian culture, an effeminate man is commonly described as *menaswen* (منسون), a term derived from the Arabic word *nisa'* (نساء), "women," the plural form of *mar'a* (مرأة). In formal Arab settings, the standard Arabic term used to describe an effeminate man is *mukhannath* (مخنث), originating from the Arabic verb *khannatha* (خنث), signifying "to bend." This term designates a man who imitates women in behavior and speech, and who chooses to have a feminine clothing style. In the book *Encyclopedia of Gay Histories and Cultures* (2013), edited by George Haggerty, Frédéric Lagrange conceptualises the term:

> The common meaning is thus explained by the effeminate's
> "pliability" and "languidness" *(takassur)*, for suppleness and lack
> of firmness both in gestures and moral standards are seen as
> feminine. (Lagrange 2000, 950)

This definition was preceded by Gary David Comstock's and Susan E. Henking's in their book*Que(e)rying Religion* (1997), in which they confirmed that the term *mukhannath* refered to an effeminate man regardless of whether he was voluntarily so, and was, nonetheless, not synonymous with a transvestite (Comstock and Henking 1997, 63). There have been other discussions of the term *mukhannath*, but all with the same definition.[69]

It is vital to establish a precise and clear definition of the term *mukhannath* due to

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[68] This quote is taken from the original version of the book written in French, which I translated into English as follows: "La puissance virile, dont le siège serait le pénis, sous-tend certaines représentations identitaires du musulman de sexe masculin."

[69] See (Meisami and Starkey 1998, 548), (Geissinger 2015, 34), (Jahangir and Abdullatif 2016, 73), (Dagyeli, Ghrawi and Freitag 2021, 221), and (Rosenberg, D'Urso and Winget 2021, 290).

the possibility of inadvertent confusion with *khuntha* (خنثى). Although both terms originate from the same verb, *khuntha* is the Arabic equivalent of the term "hermaphrodite" or the more contemporary "intersex," alluding to an individual born with both male and female reproductive organs, lacking either of them, or having ambiguous genitalia. In academic and/or literary works, this distinction is essential in avoiding misinterpretations that may arise from the use of these closely related but distinct terms.

In *In a Time of Torture* (2004), Scott Long and Human Rights Watch argue:

> Police routinely torture men suspected of homosexual conduct, sometimes to extract confessions and sometimes simply as a sadistic reminder of the burden of shame their alleged behavior incurs. Men have told Human Rights Watch how they were whipped, beaten, bound and suspended in painful positions, splashed with ice-cold water, and burned with lit cigarettes. (Long 2004, 2)

The quote highlights the acts of torture that perpetuate a cycle of violence and discrimination against homosexuals whose experiences have severe physical, psychological and social consequences. The authors go on to describe what happens in Egyptian prisons and claim:

> Men taken during mass roundups may be tortured with electroshock on the limbs, genitals, or tongue. Guards encourage other prisoners to rape suspected homosexuals. Psychological torment complements the physical trauma [...] Men arrested for homosexual conduct are forcibly subjected to anal examinations at the hands of the Forensic Medical Authority, an agency of the Ministry of Justice. Doctors compel the men to strip and kneel; they massage, dilate, and in some cases penetrate the prisoners' anal cavities in search of signs that they have been "habitually used" in "sodomy." Invasive, abusive, and a form of torture in itself, the practice is predicated on outdated pseudoscience, on myths-of the "marks" left by anal intercourse-which date back nearly a century and a half. (Long 2004, 4)

In Egypt, prisoners endure distressing forms of torture right from the onset of their detention, starting with degrading measures that strip male and female inmates of their clothes, leaving them completely naked. Moreover, they are deprived of bathing facilities

and access to hot water, even during winter. Further restrictions include bans on exercise, exposure to sunlight and family visits. As detailed in the earlier passage, instances of torture frequently involve the insertion of hard objects into prisoners' anuses. This entire process is cynically referred to as *tashrifa* (تشريفة), a term that means 'honorific' and has ironically become synonymous with the ceremony of receiving new prisoners. In Egyptian prisons, cases of men being discovered engaged in homosexual intercourse have been documented. Once authorities confirm that the two individuals are involved in a homosexual relationship, they are subjected to a punishment party, usually taking place in a group setting. During this event, they endure physical beatings in front of their fellow inmates. Following this, they are confined to *ta'dib* (تأديب) (disciplinary) cells, usually measuring two square meters, where they remain isolated for several days. Subsequently, they are transferred to other, mostly more intimidating prisons. This procedure is known as *taghrib* (تغريب), signifying "alienation" as they are further isolated from society and subjected to intensified conditions of solitary confinement.

In *In the Spider's Room*, Hani is afflicted with all kinds of torture, which Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1995), refered to using the French word *supplice* (Foucault 1995, 33).[70] Despite Hani's ability to avoid repercussions for his sexual orientation within society, prison not only restricts his sexual freedom but also inflicts mental and physical harm upon him. The suffering he experiences is the epitome of the torment that any homosexual man in Egypt faces:

> During the sessions of the trial, the security presence was absurd, as if we were indeed terrorists and as if someone were going to try to set us free. A permanent wall of policemen separated us from everyone else—the lawyers, the journalists, and the families. Even the relatives were subjected to the vilest forms of abuse. When some poor-looking women asked the police about their sons, the police said, "Are you the mothers of the faggots?" (Abdelnabi 2018, 173)

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[70] The book was originally written in French and published by Gallimard in Paris in 1975. The original title of the book is *Surveiller et punir*.

Egyptians hold homosexuality as one of the most heinous crimes an individual can commit. The state's typical response towards homosexual individuals involves accusing them of spreading depravity and violating what is known as *al-haya' al-'amm* (الحياء العام) (public decency). Ironically, Hani draws a comparison between the horrific torture endured by individuals accused of terrorism in Egyptian prisons and the treatment of homosexual men, who see that their actions bear no resemblance to what Egyptian authorities consider terrorism. Nevertheless, both crimes of *khadsh al-haya' al-'amm* (خدش الحياء العام) (violation of public decency)[71] when linked to homosexual acts and *tahdid al-amn al-qawmy* (تهديد الأمن القومي) (threat to national security)[72] are treated equally by Egyptian power.

In the above quote, one can observe the stigma that haunts the mothers of homosexual men. "Are you the mothers of the faggots?" is not a common question that Egyptian women may hear from the police; rather, it is a way of looking down on them for not having educated their sons properly. The word "faggot" is used by Jonathan Wright in his translation of the novel, but in Abdelnabi's original Arabic version, the word used is *khawal* (see the chapter on Saleem Haddad). It is used in front of the mothers in its most humiliating meaning, although it is considered a very negative street word. It is also used by Hani's mother when he recalls her suspicion that he may be in love with a man named Prince: "I mean he's a faggot. Okay? Understand" (Abdelnabi 2018, 72)? Hani points out:

> She used the derogatory term without thinking, and at that
> moment something changed in the whole world, something very
> small but fundamental and permanent, as if the world had dimmed
> slightly, in a way that no one could tell unless they noticed that

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[71] Article 178 of the Egyptian Penal Code No. 58 of 1937.
[72] In Egyptian law, *tahdid al-amn al-qawmy* mostly refers to terrorist crimes. Egyptian Anti-Terrorism Law includes several chapters in Law No. 94 of 2015 regarding combating terrorism and criminalizing its financing. This law relates to organizing and combating terrorist activities and criminalizing their financing, and it is found in Chapters Twelve to Twenty-Three.

little lamp in the sky go out. (ibid, 72)

Khawal is the word that is only used in the context of contempt. Hani mentions it at various points in the novel, but always in a disparagement tone. Hani cannot remain oblivious of the fact that the word is always used by the guards while they are beating the homosexual prisoners. The phrase "[h]i faggots, hi devil worshippers, hi perverts, you sons of whores" (ibid, 172-173) almost became a song that the guards would sing along while beating them with sticks and fists. Labeling the women as "the mothers of the faggots" and the homosexual men as "sons of whores" is a horrible association made by society, culture and political power. It is a pretext to besmirch the homosexual subject's family and stigmatize his mother, who is regarded as the most important element of Egyptian and Arab family, with the accusations leveled against her son.

Through the accumulation of these nightmarish treatments over months in prison, Hani loses the ability to speak and becomes mute. After his release, he starts seeking the support of Dr. Sameeh, a psychotherapist who helps him regain his ability to speak. Dr. Sameeh does not view homosexuality as a disease—a socially and culturally negative attitude which David M. Halperin, in his book *What Do Gay Men Want?* (2007), confirms was discriminatory against and derogatory toward homosexuals for more than a century (Halperin 2007, 1)—but does acknowledge the societal pressures faced by Egyptian homosexuals (Abdelnabi 2018, 104). Only in writing, which Dr. Sameeh encourages him to continue, could Hani find sanctuary. Spending all of his post-release time in a hotel room, Hani affirms:

> That's when my relationship with writing things out began;
> writing became a substitute for my tongue. I was suffering from
> a form of transformational hysteria, as I later understood from Dr.
> Sameeh. When I could no longer take any more pressures and
> conflicts, my mind transformed them into a physical symptom to
> reduce their impact. (ibid, 175)

Hani's unwavering determination to defend his homosexual identity is the reason behind

his resistance to the brutal tortures he endured in prison. In Egyptian prisons, the torture methods used are so severe that they often result in death. The prisons are essentially engineered with the primary purpose of ensuring that prisoners do not leave them alive. In his book *Bleeding Hearts* (2021), Abdallah Hendawy claims that in addition to physically tormenting prisoners, whether by electrictroshocks or by turning knives in their backs, torture reaches even more horrific proportions. He contends:

> [T]orture also encompasses the threat of permanent, severe disfigurement, sleep deprivation, preventing prisoners from accessing proper health care, denying personal hygiene products, overriding prisons' original capacity, and other forms of abuses. (Hendawy 2021, 30)

Hani's assertion of a homosexual identity is binding on his attachment to life. Despite leaving prison profoundly scarred and voiceless, his life continues with steadfast determination. The oppression he faced was resisted by his sheer survival and will be resisted by his pen, which will heal his physical and psychological wounds. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Michel Foucault points out that if power is action, resistance is reaction, and contends:

> Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. (Foucault 1990, 96)

If prisons are indeed spaces where power is largely concentrated through organised regulations and laws and other uncodified patterns—organised and unorganised—the patterns of resistance to these policies and practices in all their forms become very clear. Resistance varies from one imprisoned person to another according to several factors, the most important ones being their social background and the reasons that led to their imprisonment, which is the case with Hani.

The reader becomes aware of the countless homosexual relationships Hani had

had before he went to prison and surprisingly learns through the pages that he had been married to a woman named Shireen. However, Hani proves that his marriage was just a facade to escape the social restrictions that pop up when an Arab man reaches the age when he should normally be married. Hani considered marriage as a game: "and even if I got married, the option of divorce was always available" (Abdelnabi 2018, 99). Some might perceive Hani's homosexuality and heterosexual marriage as paradoxical, but for him, it represents a purposeful navigation of his life. This distinctive situation enables him to lead a peaceful homosexual life while avoiding the social stigma attached to a man who chooses not to marry. When the societal pressures to wed became overwhelming for Hani, Prince provided advice, encouraging him to embrace this socially expected path. In Prince's perspective, such a decision would grant Hani greater sexual freedom:

> In the end I took Prince's advice and, like a radar antenna, I started looking around for a victim or maybe a partner in the farce in which I meant to play the lead role. (ibid, 100)

Prince's advice to Hani was based on the idea that Hani would not be the first or last homosexual man to marry a woman, either out of family pressure, or to avert suspicion, or simply to have children. Hani agrees to the idea, but there was one difference between him and the other men: "I reconfirmed what he already knew—that I had no sexual desire for women in any way, unlike some men who are bisexual" (ibid, 102).

Through Hani's fragmented psyche, the reader discovers that he had a daughter named Badriya whom he loved dearly, but after his arrest, Shireen had to file for divorce because the affair was a scandal. Divorce, in this case, occurs not only because of the scandal, but also because the husband is no longer considered a "man." If the Arab man's masculinity is suspected or interrogated, there is no way he will win his wife back as the whole of society downgrades him and views him as sexually impotent, effeminate and *fasid* (فاسد). All of these labels are given to the man when his homosexuality is confirmed.

After their divorce, Hani repeatedly blames himself for the stigma inflicted on his wife and daughter. He is well aware of the way society will look at Shireen, and well aware that she will start to be referred to as "the *khawal*'s wife." Upon meeting her, he reiterates:

> I quickly wrote a message to Shireen: "I'll never forgive myself for anything that happened to you two because of me." I looked at the piece of paper for a moment before I handed it to her. My handwriting looked shaky, like that of a child who has only just started learning to write. I shuddered as I saw Shireen struggling for words. (ibid, 109)

Writing becomes Hani's ultimate task. He finally feels healed and regains the ability to speak, a weapon his arsenal only needed to increase his power of resistance. That he meets Abdel Aziz again, with whom he wants to assert his homosexuality, is an act of non-submission to the social, cultural and hegemonic powers he faced. This upholds Michel Foucault's idea when he argues that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1990, 96). Hani then declares:

> I kept imagining the extraordinary white coat spattered with blood, and it wasn't a pleasant sight. Yet I insisted on going all the way with Abdel Aziz, whether as murderer or as victim, it didn't matter. (Abdelnabi 2018, 125)

Abdelnabi portrays Hani as a militant or warrior who had to fight alone against a multitude of entities despite torture in prison, his mother's suspicions, his divorce, *kalam il-nas* (people's words), and the pressures that he will always confront. Deciding to start his homosexual journey with dozens of male partners, Hani agrees to meet Abdel Aziz on the same square where the nightmare began, but now, with his face uncovered in broad daylight and without his glasses. He holds Abdel Aziz's hand and proudly admits: "And at that moment, everything seemed possible" (ibid, 196).

IX. Conclusion

The way members of a society attribute meaning to and experience sex depends on the organization of the culture they belong to and its ideological orientation. The phenomenon of love and sex is experienced and expressed in various social settings, compositions, and ethnographic and historical contexts. Therefore, sexual identity is shaped, assigned meaning, and evaluated differently based on the socio-cultural environments in which it develops, leading to the categorization of sexual desires. In Arab society, the dominant discourse surrounding only one form of "good," "moral," "natural," and "reproductive" sexuality, namely heterosexuality, has resulted in its normalization and prioritization. Consequently, any other sexual practice is sidelined, marginalized, "hunted," and condemned, pushing individuals into isolation, fear, silence, or even erasure.

Queer sexuality undoubtedly poses a significant challenge to heterosexuality, which has long been positioned as the norm. Heterosexuality, along with the construction of identities and sexualities based on the masculine/feminine binary, has been solidified by patriarchal logic. Any identity that does not conform to either of these categories is viewed as an unacceptable deviation. It is evident that this heteropatriarchal reflection serves to perpetuate the social and cultural dominance of masculinity. Therefore, it becomes imperative to foster genuine pluralism regarding sexuality and sexual fulfillment, particularly in a contemporary world that simultaneously punishes diversity and difference. Achim Rohde, Christina von Braun and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum back up this argument when they argue, in their book *National Politics and Sexuality in Transregional Perspective* (2017):

> When authors write about non-normative sexual orientations,
> they subvert established discourses on Arab Muslim identity that

> are enshrined in official state discourse and propagated by religious authorities [...] By interrogating representations of homosexuality in Arabic literature [...] scholars reveal oppressive structures portrayed in that literature and help rearticulate the literary discourse. (Rohde, von Braun and Schüler-Springorum 2017, 187)

According to the novelists I have examined, queerness should be celebrated not only for its subversive potential in parodying male dominance but primarily because it continually challenges the internalized phallic male as an object of sacrifice. These reflections remain relevant as I conclude my analysis of the novels under scrutiny. Far beyond representing power dynamics pertaining to gender and sexuality, my writers employ queerness to metaphorically bury not only hegemonic masculinity but also entrenched notions concerning the construction of sexual identities. As a theoretical concept, queer sexuality aims to destabilize and weaken the traditional hegemony of heterosexuality by demonstrating alternative ways of experiencing sexuality and identity.

Through the unique journeys of various male and female characters, I have endeavored to depict the lived experiences, construction, and perception of homosexuality. This has led me to present the cases of different Arab writers who strive to escape the pervasive homophobia prevalent in their countries. I have observed that their journeys mirror those of numerous writers who courageously denounce the hostility, repression, and homophobia often associated with the Arab world. Subsequently, I have delineated how homosexual individuals transition from discovering their sexual orientation to asserting and affirming themselves. My focus has been to explore how homosexuals respond to society's stigmatization in order to establish a stronger sense of identity. This exploration has also provided insights into the evolving visibility of homosexuals, which primarily emphasizes how self-acceptance empowers the characters portrayed in these novels throughout their journeys, mitigating the uncertainties surrounding their identities and homosexuality.

By exploring the racial, sexual, and cultural identities of Siham, Meemee, Hanan, Alyah, the unnamed protagonist in *The Others*, Abdellah, Raza and Hani in my corpus, my aim was to illustrate the inseparable connection between the sexuality of homosexuals and their overall identity. In essence, their sexual orientation serves as a defining element, inherent to their being. Consequently, the notions of self-affirmation, self-definition, and self-determination are consistently intertwined with these characters' aspirations. Throughout my study, I have gained insights into how some individuals construct their identities, employing strategies of resistance to confront derogatory, sexist, racial, repressive, and homophobic remarks and attitudes which society contemptuously uses against them.

The rise of Arab(ic) literature with queer themes intersecting with Arab society is becoming unavoidable. Arab-Muslim countries are still resistant to the cultural normalization of non-heterosexuality, but the last two decades have witnessed an increasing number of written works on the issue of queer sexuality, including fiction, non-fiction books, and journal articles, the most recent of which include Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed's *Homosexuality, Transidentity, and Islam* (2019), Elias Jahshan's *This Arab is Queer* (2022) and Mejdulene Bernard Shomali's *Between Banat* (2023). The writing on queer sexuality within the Arab-Muslim world was expected and goes in alignment with Amanullah De Sondy in his book *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (2013), where he contends:

> [O]ther forms of Islamic masculinity (e.g. homosexual) or Muslim femininity (e.g. lesbian) linked to sexual preference [...] are also marginalized communities who are battling against the heteronormative mainstream in Islamic societies and traditions. (De Sondy 2013, 57)

One cannot, of course, aver that Arabs will accept the presence of queer individuals within their circles, but the global pervasive mediatization of queerness through all media outlets

has encouraged some queer Arabs to come out as queer, and most of the time, as homosexual. This relates to the fact that "[the] ambivalence toward foregrounding of queer writing reflects a larger feeling that there are more platforms for queer than non-queer Arab writer" (Mehrez 2019, 179), contends Samia Mehrez in her book *In The Shoes of the Other* (2019).

This dissertation has aimed to demonstrate how queer Arab individuals challenge heteronormative Arab culture and assert their non-conforming sexual orientation. It is worth noting that in most Arab(ic) novels, one observes that the protagonist is an inherently queer character who strives to find a space where they can embrace their sexuality without facing stigma. Novels such as *Ra'ihat Al-Qirfah*, in which queer sexuality is depicted as situational or circumstantial, support this argument. When Samar Yazbek's two female protagonists, Hanan and Aliyah, demur against the oppressive heteropatriarchal norms imposed by Syrian men, they defiantly subvert them by embracing lesbianism. With this in mind, I can argue that the decision to embrace a queer identity signifies that this queerness has already been present within the Arab individual's tank of desires. In situations where the queer character faces social discrimination or feels compelled to conform to heteropatriarchal societal expectations, they may resort to heterosexuality as a means of seeking safety and avoiding disgrace, but not to heterosexuality as an identity.

Within my analysis, if an individual is initially depicted as heterosexual, I discover through the course of the novel that they adopt this orientation to avoid societal exclusion; if the individual oscillates between queerness and heterosexuality, we become increasingly convinced that their true sexual orientation is queer because it is uncommon to encounter a fully heterosexual individual transitioning to queerness, except in cases where financial gain is involved, as seen in Mohamed Shukri's novel *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*

(الخبز الحافي) (*For Bread Alone*) (1972); and last, when the protagonist is initially portrayed as queer, the author demonstrates that this is their natural and only sexual orientation.

Contemporary queer Arab(ic) writing demonstrates that queer sexuality is the norm, while heterosexuality is the exception. In this context, certain novels depict queer characters rebelling against societal constraints that suppress their sexuality, highlighting the fact that queerness is the action, while heterosexuality is a reaction, rather than the other way around. When a queer Arab individual reveals their socially non-conventional sexual orientation, the response from society is often one exclusion and erasure. This challenges the notion that heterosexuality always precedes queerness. Even in cases where queer individuals respond to societal pressures by embracing homo- or bisexuality, it is not because they feel stigmatized as heterosexuals. Instead, it is because they reject the norms that socially and culturally prioritize certain elements, particularly patriarchal ones, over their own identities.

It should be pointed out that the construction and assertion of the Arab individuals' queer identity of is a reaction to the reaction. This cultural conflict begins with the individual's disclosure of their queer sexuality, which prompts society to tarnish their reputation and question their place and presence within its sphere. In turn, the individual resists by striving to challenge the dishonor imposed upon them by that society. The conventional usage of the concept of identity is linked to how individuals perceive and define themselves. The question "who am I?" is answered by each individual, but is also influenced by the perceptions of others. This initial inquiry is closely intertwined with a second one: "how do I present myself to others?" Specifically, I understand sexual identity as the way individuals interpret and define their sexual and romantic desires and behaviors, both in terms of self-definition and how they portray themselves to others.

The identity construction of the queer subject undergoes a process of social representation that assigns stigmatizing labels and portrays this form of eroticism as a negative and unacceptable. These representations impede the potential for embracing queerness as a divergent sexuality, since various perspectives label this expression of eroticism as perverted, depraved, deviant, maladaptive, and/or sick. Furthermore, these perspectives also negate the existence of affection between homosexual Arabs themselves. Society allows itself to intervene in this realm, designating them as individuals who violate societal norms and, as a result, challenge venetrated heteropatriarchal protocol. Consequently, they are expected to remain outside of it. This leads to the lack of a symbolic universe where queer individuals can find validation and recognition, effectively forcing them to self-declare their disapproval of their own behavior. However, assuming the normative sexuality embodies the anguish and the alteration of the existential states. Thus, queer desire must dare to come out, even amid denial and invisibility.

It is through eroticism, which encompasses the inseparable connection between sex and affect, that the possibility of the queer individual's existence unfolds. Erotic experiences allow for the convergence of the senses and the discovery of symbolic references necessary for self-being. With the mediation of eroticism, the fundamental question of queer identity, initially laden with self-condemnation, takes on a new trajectory. Consequently, the self-identification of lesbian women has undergone a transformative process, resulting in a new identity formation. This transformation is intricately tied to the act of challenging societal norms and embracing the unique sensations that shape their existence: the desire for individuals of the same sex. The three lesbian novels I have discussed succeed in doing so by "centering queer women's lives,

emotions, and experiences" (Shomali 2023, 105), argues Mejdulene Bernard Shomali in her book *Between Banat* (2023).

Queer discourse has facilitated the inclusion of non-heterosexual Arabs in spaces where they can live, form connections with their peers, and discover a realm of meaning that enables them to position themselves at the heart of the Arab sexual landscape. We observe how the construction of queer discourse transitions from representations that distort it and are destructive, to the formation of unique identities through eroticism, on the one hand, and the dismantling of heteropatriarchal discourses, both institutional and cultural, on the other.

In the queer literature produced by Arab authors, otherness takes center stage. Non-heteronormative sexual identities prevail in the fictional realm. While acknowledging the existence of an "alterity" in relation to heterosexual society, the characters' universe is predominantly one of the Other. It is within this ladder that queer characters define themselves by challenging and provoking the established model, in a manner that can be perceived as "militant." Throughout their lives, these characters fiercely fight for their rightful place and refuse to surrender to heteronormative dominance. However, in the novels discussed, we are not encountering narratives of militant pamphleteering. The authors in my corpus strive to present new dimensions of sexuality within a context of liberation. They depict queerness with its range of emotions, conflicts, humiliations, joys, and sorrows, representing it from an intimate and subjective standpoint. It is from this vantage point that a resounding call for supporting sexual diversity becomes evident, thereby conveying power. The examination of the queer characters under scrutiny demonstrates that difference is indeed acknowledged, but tolerance is not sought. This is because tolerance implies accepting the marginalization imposed by heteronormativity, and my characters actively distance themselves from such

a position of seeking tolerance. These characters do not view themselves as superior or inferior to society. Their aim is to exist alongside heterosexuality without seeking social tolerance, as the notion of tolerance implies a sense of inferiority, error, or defectiveness. They perceive their homosexuality neither as a flaw nor a defect.

This corpus does not present us with politically correct models of sexual identity; its characters, in general, do not strive for assimilation into the heteronormative models tolerated by society. My characters firmly embrace their difference, queerness, and do not compromise with accepted norms of Arab sexuality. Hence, within the novels, we encounter characters who authentically depict queer sexuality as an integral part of their identities, offering insights into the intricacies of the queer Arab community with its varied and heterogeneous features. It is likely for this reason that my corpus portrays the queer Arab community in a remarkably pluralistic and diverse manner, standing out within the current landscape of Arab(ic) narratives.

Abdellah Taïa and Saleem Haddad have clearly articulated their goals as writers. Through numerous interviews conducted in recent years (2016-2023), it becomes evident how they position themselves regarding their sexual identity. Even though they live in diaspora, they openly acknowledge their homosexuality and do not shy away from discussing their own identities within Arab circles. Instead, they present themselves as part of a larger community, diminishing the impact of otherness. From this inclusive standpoint, the writer themself starts to speak and rebel, with otherness becoming the universe in which they reside. Their aspiration for a sexually liberated existence aptly exemplifies their intent to define themselves as queer writers.

To this day, I cannot confirm the non-heterosexuality of the four other writers, Elham Mansour, Seba Al-Herz, Samar Yazbek and Muhammad Abdelnabi. However, one can infer from their novels that they espouse the same principles as those who are

known for having already come out. Their works aim to illuminate the power wielded by queer Arab individuals. All of them demonstrate how homo- or bisexuality exerts pressure on Arab society, compelling it to suppress and oppress such identities. This oppression, in turn, instills within queer characters a form of "cultural and social immunity" against stigma and rejection. Paradoxically, the more they experience rejection from Arab society, the more determined to assert their queer identity they become, as exemplified by characters such as Abdellah in *An Arab Melancholia*, Raza in *Guapa*, and Hani in *In the Spider's Room*.

Queer Arab(ic) Literature

This dissertation assumes a perspective that considers external uses and prejudices towards literary works and literature as a whole. Interestingly, my analysis does not dismiss the designation of "Queer Arab(ic) literature." Instead, it redefines this categorization as a cultural definition, highlighting that the label refers to the literature originating from a specific social sector rather than indicating that it is solely intended for a limited social group. In essence, my authors conceive of "Queer Arab(ic) Literature" as a literature with homoerotic themes that appeals to a broad audience, transcending their and their characters' sexuality, as it is not exclusively written for queer individuals. These authors appropriate the language used by society to denigrate queer subjects, and engage in a process of resignification, whereby they reclaim derogatory words and reassign them with inherent value.

This corpus does not present a marginalized chronicle of a bleak world. Instead, it immerses us in the diverse queer Arab community, showcasing its contrasting aspects, both shadowy and radiant. My authors construct a continuum of literary works that encapsulate their stance on human sexuality, defending the heterogeneity of the Arab

homosexual world. This defense, a rarity in Arab(ic) literature, promotes and celebrates the broadest and most pluralistic understanding of human sexuality.

Translation

Reading this dissertation, one of the questions that is to be asked is why I have not broadly spoken about the terms used in different Arab dialects to refer to a lesbian. This is because Arab dialects are founded upon patriarchy, which only scolds and downgrades the phenomena that threaten to weaken masculinity. This means that the Arabic language and Arab dialects are heteropatriarchal, and they are relentlessly insulting towards men who are not regarded as "men." When an Arab man is accused or suspected of homosexuality, language becomes his first opponent, legitimizing his stigmatization and denigration. In Arab society, women do not really represent a menace to the law of masculinity and, as a result, they are not as much tarnished through language as are gay men. There is no Arab dialectical term synonymous with the term "lesbian." This can also be attributed to the fact that lesbians have always been excluded from the conflictual arena between society and male homosexuals. The absence of derogatory terms directed at Arab lesbians does not necessarily indicate tolerance; instead, it underscores the patriarchal system's indifference to women's existence and their defiance of male-centric norms.

The translational processes employed in this dissertation are pivotal in bridging the gap between the source text and the target audience, ensuring that the rich tapestry of emotions, themes, and cultural nuances embedded in the novels are faithfully conveyed. At the outset of the translational endeavor, careful consideration was given to the selection of transliteration methods. A meticulous balance was struck between preserving the authenticity of Arabic and its dialects and rendering the transliterated terms comprehensible for readers who may not be familiar with the intricacies of these

languages. In this dissertation, transliteration is not merely a mechanical process; it is an art that demands a keen understanding of script and the distinct features of each Arabic dialect.

Furthermore, a judicious selection of dialectical words and their transliterations was undertaken to preserve the regional flavors inherent in the novels under scrutiny. These words often encapsulate sentiments, historical contexts, or societal dynamics that are crucial to the queer Arab experience. The translational process often necessitates a deep dive into the socio-cultural connotations of these words, ensuring that their significance is not lost in translation. This issue was addressed by B.J. Epstein and Robert Gillett in their book *Queer in Translation* (2017), stating that "The problematics of the translation of specific terms and the shifts in their referents can also be implicated in the issues of appropriation and a 'hierarchy of legitimacy'" (Epstein and Gillet 2017, 10). This is the main reason why care was taken to contextualize these terms, providing endnotes that elucidate their meanings and cultural significance, thus enriching the reader's engagement with the dissertation.

Cultural sensitivity is paramount throughout the translational journey. Queer Arab(ic) literature is often imbued with themes that intersect with religion, tradition, and society. The translational processes navigate these sensitive terrains by maintaining a delicate equilibrium between fidelity to the source text and respect for the cultural sensitivities of both the source and target communities. Through the careful selection of transliteration methods, dialectical words, and a nuanced approach to queer representation, these processes stand as a testament to the intricate interplay of the linguistic and cultural dynamics that shape queer Arab(ic) literature.

Presentation and Representation

Amid co-significations, metaphorical and symbolic forms, and sometimes explicit references, the representations of the queer characters in this corpus emphasized in this dissertation disrupt the hegemony of heterosexuality. They provide a name, an identity, and support for individuals who identify as queer. Simultaneously, these representations offer all of them the impetus to assert their right to sexual choice, the pursuit of their sexual desires, and the necessity to challenge or explore social stereotypes, ingrained expectations, and societal fixation on the body and its sexuality.

Reflecting on the process of transitioning from ignorance and obscurity to the revelation of new sexual identities, it becomes evident that the authors in this corpus shared a common objective. Their aim was to inform, shape, and provide genuine and accurate portrayals of queer sexuality. The main distinction among these authors lies in the varying levels of courage demonstrated and the motivations behind their exploration of this theme. Yazbek sought to emphasize alternative erotic desires and challenge the dominance of heterosexuality, while Mansour, Haddad, Taïa and Abdelnabi employed homoeroticism as a means to disrupt conventional norms. Despite any unintended disturbances caused along the way, their ultimate goal was to challenge and subvert the prevailing discourse of heterosexuality within society.

Moreover, considering the contentious nature of queerness within the Arab world, the new narratives depicting queer Arab life and experiences become entwined within a constantly evolving framework of concepts surrounding gender identity and sexuality. The construction of identities itself becomes a historical process characterized by conflicting narratives. These narratives involve opposing accounts of self and others, reflecting stories of difference that are appropriated and redefined as narratives of positioning within a society marked by structured inequalities. In this context, the novels

I have discussed hold significance as stories of difference, innovation, and resistance within a society where the dominance of heterosexual discourse is no longer absolute. In this context, queer narratives are no longer condemned or relegated to darkness and obscurity simply because they challenge heteropatriarchal values at their core.

The argument that I have advanced throughout this thesis is that queer Arab literature possesses the capacity to disrupt the norms that govern everyday life. By challenging the prevailing notions of sexuality, particularly within predominantly Arab-Muslim communities, it undermines the established order and weakens the traditional understanding of masculinity. The binary division between male and female is called into question, and these novels reveal that homosexuality should not be seen as a lesser form of sexual expression compared to heterosexuality. Instead, it should be recognized as an autonomous phenomenon in its own right. The deliberate portrayal of so-called deviant sexuality plays a crucial role in contradicting the expectations imposed by the heterosexual order. Through this, the protagonists are able to construct themselves as independent and self-determined individuals.

Non-normative sexuality serves as a salient focal point for questioning identity construction within predominantly Arab-Muslim contexts, whereas literature plays a central role in this examination of identity politics as it unveils and brings visibility to sexualities that were previously shrouded in silence. This capacity to destabilize is most apparent when we conceive of the process of reading and interpreting as a dynamic experience, where the reader is invited to embrace them and allow their own preconceptions to intertwine with those of the author and the text itself. While the novels in this corpus bear a resemblance to their socio-economic and cultural milieu, each one of them deviates from and subverts reality to create a fragmented literary universe characterized by precariousness, rather than stability. It is precisely within this state of

instability that meaning must be sought. It is within this realm of uncertainty that alternative perspectives on identity, sexuality, and gender can be contemplated. What is particularly noteworthy about the novelists I have highlighted is their ability to challenge and transcend the male/female and masculine/feminine dichotomy that permeates the discourse, actions, and representations of Arab-Muslim societies. This assists them in creating an alternative order capable of disrupting the existing social structure.

The novels in this corpus possess the potential to resist cultural and literary conventions, thereby enabling us to explore the full spectrum of sexual dissidence. They, indeed, present themselves as unstable structures, continuously seeking meaning and unity, revealing that the journey towards constructing an identity and subjectivity is unpredictable and perpetually uncertain. However, it is within this uncertainty that a new mode of reading and perception emerges, not only within literature but also within the interpretation process. This approach necessitates a dialogical and non-violent ethical framework that initiates a vital dialogue between the realm of the written word and the lived experiences of everyday life.

The portrayal of the queer character reinforces the theme of the fluidity of the quest for identity. The protagonists in the works of the six novelists scrutinized are destined to wander in their search to surpass ethnic, social, cultural, and even national classifications. In this way, they are not trying to assert and impose their difference to create scandal but rather to erase monolithic categorizations that only perpetuate a logic of intolerance towards them and their otherness. In the study of the reception of queer-themed novels, we have observed how they challenge established notions not only of sexuality and identity but also of the appreciation of diversity. It becomes undoubtedly urgent to move beyond an interpretation that solely focuses on the social significance of these novelistic works. However, if we manage to disregard the queer aspect of sexuality

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in these novels, what remains? Herein lies the originality of these novels, as they surpass mere depictions of so-called deviant sexuality by using it to delve into a wide array of other existential questions and challenges associated with the human condition.

What emerges from my analysis of the representation of queer sexuality in the novels discussed is that it undermines gender and sexual identities by initially establishing a mechanism to highlight marginality. The visibility of the homosexual subject recaptures the portrayal of sexual marginality. The literary, stylistic, and narratological approaches differ among the novelists, but the objective remains the same, a complete challenge to the existing norm. In this regard, the literary space creates a realm of possibility, simultaneously constructing and staging the subjectivity of the protagonists who strive to liberate themselves from the normative constraints of sexual desire. Furthermore, it is of crucial to perceive "marginal" sexuality as an orientation that can be contemplated as a catalyst. It facilitates the exploration, exploitation, and critique of various cultural discourses that purport to be hegemonic and normative.

The examined dimension of the novels in my corpus derived from the collaboration between an engaged reader and the text itself, enabling the exploration of its semantic and thematic flexibility. Throughout the different sections of my study, my objective remains constant: to comprehend the intricacies of the interplay between sexuality, reception, meaning, and language. The approach I have adopted emphasizes fluidity and rejects the notion of certainty. However, it is through the expression of this fluidity that the texts in my corpus derive their significant potential and inherent quality. I have endeavored to demonstrate that the genuine and transparent portrayal of "marginal" sexuality in the works of the six novelists underscores its undeniable existence and the futility of its suppression.

Classical Arabic and Dialectical Arabic(s)

While this dissertation has focused on queer sexuality, the application of Arab dialects and Arabic could extend to the exploration of other marginalized identities and diverse voices within Arab(ic) literature. By delving into different linguistic registers and dialects, we can uncover the nuances of how characters from various backgrounds and social strata navigate their identities, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of intersectionality. Arabic, as a rich and dynamic language, has evolved over centuries, reflecting the historical and cultural shifts within the Arab world. By analyzing the linguistic choices in queer narratives across different time periods, we can trace the evolution of societal attitudes towards sexuality. Similarly, studying rich dialects like Moroccan *Darija* in various eras can shed light on how local perspectives on gender and sexuality have transformed, providing insights into the intersections of language, culture, and social change.

The use of both Classical Arabic and Arab dialects in this dissertation has opened the door for future researchers to conduct comparative analyses of queer narratives across different linguistic registers. This can involve exploring how characters' expressions of their sexuality differ when using formal classical Arabic versus the more vernacular language. Such analyses have the potential to reveal power dynamics, social hierarchies, and nuances in communication based on language choice. In fact, the application of dialectical Arabic(s) and Classical Arabic extends beyond national borders, given the dispersion of Arab populations across the globe. Future research is to investigate how linguistic and cultural shifts impact the portrayal of queer characters in transnational and diasporic Arab literature. This exploration may contribute to a deeper understanding of how diaspora influences self-identity, and how language acts as a bridge to expressing marginalized sexualities.

As literature often intertwines with other forms of art and media, there is potential to explore the intersection of visual and verbal expressions of queer identity. Analyzing visual arts, such as painting or cinema, where both Arab dialects and Classical Arabic are employed, will offer a more holistic understanding of how queerness is represented and interpreted across different creative media. The application of Arab dialects and Classical Arabic in the analysis of queer sexuality in Arab(ic) novels holds significant potential for further exploration and understanding. The linguistic nuances, historical trajectories, and sociocultural dimensions embedded within these languages offer a rich tapestry for researchers to unravel. The avenues I have outlined above merely scratch the surface of the myriad possibilities for future scholarship in this area.

Writing vs. Speech

What I have certainly learned by analyzing these novels is that beyond the sincere expression of so-called deviant sexuality and subversive identity, there exists an extraordinary power and a rare and convincing courage. These authors have shown us that Arab-Muslim communities in the Arab world cannot continue to marginalize those whose sexuality is considered queer. The novels have undoubtedly shown that if it is often difficult to negotiate speech, writing offers a free space, especially for queer individuals.

Arab-Muslim communities persistently exhibit an undeniable lack of acceptance towards marginalized and divisive forms of sexuality. In such communities, being homosexual predominantly entails a life concealed in secrecy. The literary works in my study serve as remarkable feats, adroitly exposing and presenting queer characters amidst challenging circumstances. By daringly and publicly depicting a sexual identity often deemed aberrant and unnatural, the novelists examined unhesitatingly debunk misconceptions and infuse humanity into sexuality. Their novels have emerged as a

powerful voice for the voiceless, exemplifying the possibility of peacefully embracing one's so-called deviant sexual orientation, and prompting the reader to reevaluate the notion of sexual identity.

The literary works encompassed in my research challenge the notion of fixed and homogeneous identities within Arab-Muslim communities, as well as the positioning of individuals within familial and social contexts. This is achieved through a process of reconfiguring the long tradition of writing about same-sex desire in Arabic literature, presenting an alternative image that counters the prevailing reality where marginalized experiences are relegated to silence. Furthermore, this transformative process aims to legitimize marginality and liberate it from the negative associations typically attached to it, regardless of its diverse manifestations. By employing the literary medium, the exploration of deviant sexuality transitions from the periphery to the forefront of discourses unfolding within the literary sphere. As the six writers transpose queer experiences into their novels, they become liberated from the constraints imposed by conservative societies and then enable their protagonists to unmute themselves.

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Résumé en anglais

This PhD dissertation undertakes a rigorous exploration into the lives of queer characters, primarily homosexuals, depicted in six Arab(ic) novels. Authored by Elham Mansour, Seba Al-Herz, Samar Yazbek, Abdellah Taïa, Saleem Haddad, and Muhammad Abdelnabi, these novels challenge the deeply ingrained norms of Arab society, which stands an intransigent opponent of sexual diversity. It critically examines how these characters assert their homosexual identity amidst the pervasive influence of Arab culture, society, and Islam, three pillar that significantly shape their experiences and limit their agency. Furthermore, a central focus lies on the power of language, as these characters reclaim and transform stigmatizing Arabic and Arab dialects into a tool to affirm their homosexuality.

Titre en français

La littérature queer arabe et ses processus de traduction : le roman queer du XXIe siècle par des auteurs arabes féminins et masculins

Résumé en français

Cette thèse de doctorat entreprend une exploration rigoureuse de la vie de personnages queer, principalement homosexuels, représentés dans six romans arabes. Écrits par Elham Mansour, Seba Al-Herz, Samar Yazbek, Abdellah Taïa, Saleem Haddad et Muhammad Abdelnabi, ces romans remettent en question les normes profondément enracinées de la société arabe, qui se dresse comme un opposant intransigeant à la diversité sexuelle. Elle examine de manière critique comment ces personnages affirment leur identité homosexuelle au milieu de l'influence omniprésente de la culture, de la société et de l'islam, trois piliers qui façonnent considérablement leurs expériences et limitent leur capacité d'agir. L'étude de la langue arabe et de dialectes arabes permet de montrer comment ceux-ci sont utilisés pour marginaliser les personnes queer mais aussi comment ces dernières se réapproprient la langue et la transforme en un outil pour affirmer leur homosexualité.

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