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# Female Homosexuality in the Contemporary Arabic Novel

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by

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Give name to the nameless so it can be thought  
(Audre Lorde)

Abstract: In recent years, a set of novels published in the Arab world have a homosexual (gay or lesbian) as their main character. Studies on homosexuality and literature in the Arab world recently published tend to analyze the subject in a dichotomist way, i.e., they tend to be based only on a historical perspective and offer a monolithic image of homosexuality and Islam and its literary expression. In this paper, I will read some of these novels to underline how the female homosexual character is still bound to a binary structure of society, thus preventing these novel from being LGTB ones in full, but setting the basis for new developments, the growth of a new aesthetic form, and a rethinking of the literary canon.

In recent years, several novels have been published in the Arabic language, whose main subject is female homosexuality. This appears to be a novelty because until recent years the homosexual character was present, but only as a male one. In fact, while I was writing the chapter dedicated to Arabic literature on the subject of a monograph published in 2012 (Jolanda Guardi and Anna Vanzan 2012), I noticed a negation-silence through the centuries in relation to female homosexuality<sup>1</sup> which seems to be what was called “silent sin”, i.e. so obscene that it cannot even be mentioned. While, on the one hand, I noticed this silence, on the other I found quite a few classical texts, written mainly by men who generally treated the subject with irony (e. g. al-Yamānī 2006; at-Tīfaṣī 1992). As Sahar Amer puts it: “The Arabic writings that have survived focus on men much more than women; they remain for the most part phallogocentric and ultimately reflect a male perspective” (Sahar Amer 2009: 221).

What I missed most was a *discourse* that would propose a reading that takes into account concepts of gender and class and tries to “diffract” and “articulate” in-

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<sup>1</sup> Several papers and essays have in fact been published, and sources edited too on male homosexuality.

stead of representing (Katie King 1994: 97). I think that both class and gender are mutually and constantly intersected, and gender construction is functional to a *discourse* of power that proposes a gender hierarchy functional to a heteronormative sexuality binary division of society. Setting a web of relations in a context, then, is extremely useful today, when Arab culture in the West is used to redefine the role of women in our country, while what is called “sexual deviance” (*šudūd*) in Arab newspapers is employed just after the Arab revolutions to present a model of woman which is traditional and functional to a deeply repressive political strategy (Jolanda Guardi 2012). Therefore what I intend to do is to examine if and how, within a system which conceives gender as strictly defined, the relationship between women enacts through their bodies, having always in mind that, as Judith Butler says, a body who does not conform her/himself to the heteropatriarchal norm is a subversive political body (Judith Butler 1993). To do this, my goal is to analyze some recent novels written in the Arabic language in their performative aspect, that is to seek what they “say to real” and if they actually present a performative subject. I will do this by reading what is written in these novels and what is not. In fact,

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things [...] There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Michel Foucault 1978: I, 27).

Let us start with an assumption by Frantz Fanon taken from *Peau noire, masques blancs*: “Étant endendu que parler, c’est exister absolument pour l’autre” (Franz Fanon 1971: 36). What I will try to investigate is therefore how and if this “speaking” is present and, in the affirmative case, if a homosexual “I” does exist in the contemporary Arabic novel. In this way I attempt to read what Chela Sandoval calls “the webs of power” (Chela Sandoval 2000) to propose a change of perspective in the reading of Arabic literature as new political identities emerge which alter – with small changes of diffraction – the “malestream” (K. King 1994: 91) canon.

As I mentioned above, it is mostly men who have spoken about female homosexuality, often with irony and/or with an entertainment goal. If this is particularly true for the classical period – in which literature is abundant – as time went by the subject became more and more censored. Here and there, some references are conveyed by allusion, and lesbianism is only recalled when referring to Islamic law.

In the contemporary novel, we witness a radical change. The topic comes back in literature as a real character in novels by both female and male authors. This is a radical change because it shows us not only characters who are well inserted in their social milieu and are – at least in their behaviour – openly homosexual, but also because, in some cases, they question themselves about their sexual identity. These novels have homosexual hero(ine)s and/or are addressed to a homosexual reading public. This introduces a small fissure in the main canon. Although situated at its borders, this literary production breaks in some way the solidity of the normative canon forcing scholars who research Arabic literature to reconsider the literary canon definition and how to conduct our literary studies, even if change and birth of a new literary genre are in progress.

If until some years ago the homosexual act in literature was denied or read as a symbol for the violence of power (e.g. Ġamāl al-Ġitānī 1989; Naguib Maḥfūz 1995), meaning the negation of subjects and subjectivities; through this recent change they have become hero(in)es or subjects of literature and, since they take the floor, they become reality (Judith Butler 1997). Therefore, making oneself acquainted with this literature, and the following critical production – and I would say that the simple act of studying it is considered, precisely for this reason, a subversive act – creates reality. Moreover, until recent times – and in some way still today – Arabic literature was subjected to political censorship by authors as well as by female and male scholars. Such a condemnation, while identifying what cannot be said, defines it at the same, so produces “words”, i.e. a discourse. In this sense, censorship precedes the text and, as Judith Butler says, it is somehow responsible for its production (Judith Butler 1997: 191). The censorship mechanism is used in the production of subjects but also in defining the parameters for establishing what is admissible and what is not in a specific discourse. The aim is to construct a consensus, where censorship becomes an instrument to support the discourse of power. My aim is then to see what kind of reality emerges from the reading of these novels, taking into account the role of censorship and self-censorship.

This process involves at least three kinds of discourse: the first is related to female authors, the second regards ourselves as researchers, and the third involves the act of translating. It is clear from what I have said that the discourse I refer to is intersected with power and it is a political one, whether we like it or not. The research we do, when we do it, is a political act, as is the act of writing in itself. This means that I question myself about the mode of writing and the emphasis on what the heteronormative academic discourse on Arabic literature defines as “critical” as opposed to what I am writing about. The so-called “critical” language, in fact, makes me part of the dominant patriarchal forms of domination. The search for other realities involves the search for a mode of writing with people rather than about people (Světlá Čmejrková 2007). As Ghassan Hage affirms: “It is difficult to imagine a mode of scientific knowledge that does not take part with the logic of domestication. Yet this knowledge can be at least be tempered with a desire not to reveal and unveil” (Ghassan Hage 2013). Therefore I strongly believe that no discourse about gender can be analyzed in literature referring only to the philological, historical or descriptive aspect of a certain work. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick affirms:

It becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know (1990: 2-3).

Since I am talking about literature, another important issue connected to it is language: to set oneself (as an author as well as a researcher) outside the linguistic norm means to become a non-subject, which is why it is important for Arab novelists to write in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> At this point, the choice could be silence as a possible space for resistance – and this is an issue that still has to be studied – that is without

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<sup>2</sup> There are actually a lot of novels about the topic written in languages other than Arabic (e. g. French and English), but their impact on the Arab-speaking reading public is of course very different and they are often written with a Western reader as audience.

choosing between what can be said and what is “unsayable”. Another alternative is creating autonomy in the writing space for oneself, remaining within the mainstream canon and undergoing censorship, but creating at the same time a space for criticism and for the expression of one’s own ideas.

This is what I will try to point out, proposing a reading of the following novels written in Arabic: *Raḥi’at al-qirfa* (Cinnamon) by the Sirian author Samer Yazbek (2008), *Malāmiḥ* (Outlines) by the Saudi author Zaynab Ḥifnī (2006), *Al-āḥarūna* (The Others) by Šibā al-Ḥarz (2006), also of Saudi origin, and *Ana hiya anti* (I am you) by the Lebanese writer Ilhām Maṣṣūr (2000).<sup>3</sup>

Power uses a language, which is the heteronormative one, and the questions I will try to answer are: Are these novels a challenge to heteronormative patriarchy? Is there a space for autonomy within the canon? What I will try to show is that, although with different shadows, all these novels remain within a binary scenario, which does not challenge the roots of the heteronormative norm.

*Raḥi’at al-qirfa* (literally The Scent of Cinnamon), by the Syrian author Samar Yazbek was published in 2008. The novel was a great success and received very positive reviews. It describes the ancillary relationship between a woman and her black servant, and is centred on class differences. The lesbian affair is experienced as a shelter, as an alternative, on the one hand to an unsatisfactory marriage, and on the other hand to the class subaltern condition. This hinders the servant from refusing her master’s approach; the latter, at the beginning, seeks a shelter to her boring bourgeois life. ‘Aliyā, the servant, is sexually exploited by both her employers, the husband and the wife. However, while the relationship with the man is simply reduced to a sexual performance, between the two women it develops into something else, though remaining an alternative to a condition of harshness.

Opening her eyes, Ḥanan began to caress her middle, just above her barren womb, which had never produced a family heir. Only a few hours earlier, ‘Aliyā’s fingers had roamed that same area, her lips too. As she lay on the bed, Ḥanan brought back to mind her memories of ‘Aliyā, attempting to understand who the girl was exactly and who she was herself. As the scent of cinnamon wafted over her once more, she was submerged in a new wave of sadness. She shut her eyes and wound her arms around her chest. Peering out of the window, Ḥanan spotted ‘Aliyā – a black dot getting smaller and smaller (Samar Yazbek 2008: 71-72; 2012: 621).

Ḥanān seems to love ‘Aliyā, who is in a sense subdued to her mistress. Yet, one night she falls asleep in Ḥanān’s bed, and in the morning the mistress fixes the hierarchical relation: How could you have let yourself stay in my bed until morning?” (Samar Yazbek 2008: 147; 2012: 1362)

At this point, the balance of power is reversed, and the novel ends with a sense of desolation: with such assumptions, the relation cannot last. In *Cinnamon*, the homosexual intercourse is presented as a power relationship between the master and the black servant, thus perpetrating a sexual patriarchal stereotype:

For Ḥanān, the girl’s animality was a source of attraction. She would savour the touch of her fingers as they played on her back drawing pictures, and feel a strange sensation at the sight of the servant’s dark skin against her own soft white flesh. (Samar Yazbek 2008: 81-82; 2012: 744).

<sup>3</sup> The novels will be presented in an order that follows my research path and not a chronological one.

The characters have, willing or not, sexual intercourse with men too, for pleasure, duty, advantage or revenge. ‘Aliyā was sold as a child by her father to Ḥanān’s rich family, and the lesbian relation is described as something she endures from her childhood, it is neither a choice nor an orientation. It is something that at some point she uses to exert some power over her mistress, although a very limited one, because she can enact it only inside the house. It is clear that both protagonists do not identify themselves with a lesbian identity – whatever the reason for it – which is different for each of them.

Ḥanān too, though very fond of ‘Aliyā, does not seem to feel love. It is rather a sort of possession and a vindication against her husband, whom she was forced to marry and does not love. The end of the novel with Ḥanān, who in her nightdress drives her car like a fool in search of ‘Aliyā, reminds us more of the desperation of a child who has lost her toy rather than a human being who has feelings. This attitude is present throughout the novel:

You are still a child; you haven’t yet discovered your secret power source. If you had, you would have grown up faster. Are you going to stay a child for much longer? When will you grow up? Little mute. Are you mute? Do you not know how to speak? That’s the worst thing about you, and the most beautiful thing too. You will be a part of me. No, you can’t be – you’re a being of flesh and your eyes are so sly. Never mind, I’ll make you a part of... well, maybe even... Perhaps you can sit in front of me on the comodino, like a mannequin. You don’t look much like a mannequin. What do you look like? I’m not sure. You’re so delicate and soft and obedient, like a cat. No, you’re not soft – no yet. But you will be. (Samar Yazbek 2008: 75; 2012: 666).

In this novel, written in the third person, the author does not identify with the main characters. In a word, Yazbek does talk about homosexuality, but with a language that fits into the heteronormative canon, setting into the scene a relation between a very beautiful black woman and her mistress, therefore following an used/abused cliché (the servant does not do it for herself or because of her sexual orientation; she is driven to the lesbian relation by her mistress). ‘Aliyā takes revenge having sex with her husband, and the novel can only end with a separation and an allusion to ‘Aliyā going back home. In the background, the relation between Ḥanān and ‘Aliyā is only an excuse for once more telling us the stories of two women. They are tragic stories, of course, which, even if we can be sympathetic with the characters, are written within a heteronormative cliché.

If it is true, that visibility has improved in recent years – there have been novels, as already mentioned, but also theatre plays, broadcast debates, and newspaper articles on this topic – not always has this word been performative. *Cinnamon* is a mainstream novel, i.e. it inserts itself in a discourse near to power because it shows us Ḥanān – the Westernized bourgeois (presented as) a perverted woman, the “bored woman” and ‘Aliyā, who at the end of the novel returns home to her exploited life. There is no real relation between the two characters and no hope for a possibility of empowerment.

Similar to *Cinnamon*, *Malāmiḥ* (Outlines, but also Points of view) by Zaynab Ḥifnī presents the story of Turayyā, a Saudi woman, married to a man who forces her to have sexual relationships with other men in order to increase their income and their social status. The novel consists of five parts, all written in the first per-

son. The first one is the account of Ṭurayyā herself and opens with a quote from Jean Jacques Rousseau:

I will present myself, whenever the last trumpet shall sound, before the Sovereign Judge, with this book in my hand and loudly proclaim, “Thus I have acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity I have related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous, and sublime” and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous, and sublime (Jean-Jacques Rousseau 2012: 3; Zaynab Ḥifnī 2006: 5)

The second part narrates the plot from the point of view of Ḥusayn, the man, and opens with a quote of Voltaire taken from his *Philosophical Dictionary* about tolerance: “What is tolerance? It is a consequence of humanity. We are all formed by frailty and error: let us pardon reciprocally each other’s folly – that’s the first law of nature” (Voltaire 1924, *sub voce*; Zaynab Ḥifnī 2006: 57). These two parts describe the life of the couple until their divorce, and – through the quotes – seem to ascribe to nature to Ṭurayyā, and culture to Ḥusayn, thus following a patriarchal cliché. They depict life in Saudi Arabia, the author’s homeland, as strictly depending on sex prohibitions, where the relationship between woman and man has no other destiny but failure. Part three opens with an excerpt taken from Rimbaud’s *Après le déluge* (After the Flood): “–Well up, pond, – Foam, roll on the bridge and above the woods; – black cloths and organs, – lightning and thunder, – rise and roll; – Waters and sorrows, rise and revive the Floods” (Rimbaud 2012: 8; Z. Ḥifnī 2006:101), and, always in the first person, tells us the story of Ṭurayyā after Ḥusayn, as she lives her life alone and tries to find a place in society.

At a first reading it seems that this third part will be the one where the main character finally finds herself, as Rimbaud’s quote also suggests. In fact, apart from the title and the subject of the poem – an invitation always to revolt although we are not sure of success – the use of poetry reminds of Kristeva and her *La révolution du langage poétique* (Julia Kristeva 1974), where poetic language is “the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law” (Judith Butler 1990: 108).

After her divorce, Ṭurayyā becomes acquainted with other women thanks to her new “job”: she sells them clothes made in Europe. Then she tells us: “I entered the world of female homosexuals by chance” (Zaynab Ḥifnī 2006: 110. All translations are mine). This chance is Laylā, one of her customers. Once, after work in the shop, they drink tea together and Laylā tells Ṭurayyā the reason why she is not married: Apparently at first because she was waiting for love and then, after her father’s death, because she had inherited a lot of money and she doubted her pretend-ers’ sincerity. But then

I dared to ask her: Have you ever experienced love in your life?

The question surprised her, I saw her lips tremble, her hands quiver, her breath rhythm change, her chest rise and lower with her emotion, she laid her head on my breast and began to cry. I cherished her cheek to comfort her, she hold me in her arms, her hands firmly on my shoulders. Her palms became hot and she began to kiss me slowly on my face, I moved her away and wiped the tears from her face. That night, as I lay in my bed, I recalled the details of what had happened, and found myself trembling. (Zaynab Ĥifnī 2006: 112).

“Entering” the world of female homosexuals means to Ṭurayyā simply that she now can tell the reader a lot of stories about the reason why women have sexual and love relationships with other women. As one of the women says, “This was what made her turn to the world of homosexuals – she said laughing: women understand each other better” (Zaynab Ĥifnī 2006: 114).

Part four opens with following words:

I was used to hear the expression “Hind loves women”, or as they say in the West, “lesbians”, with a negative tone, in different occasions, at a party or during a visit. At the beginning I got angry, my eyes filled with tears, I thought leaving the place, and then, with time, my lips turned into a smile, as I recalled the touch of my actual lover or the details of the relation with a past one (Zaynab Ĥifnī 2006: 127).

This is the point of view of Hind, the one who will really love Ṭurayyā, and who is conscious of her sexual orientation. In fact, this part opens with a verse taken from “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” by Wallace Stevens: “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/or heard or felt came not but from myself” (Wallace Stevens 200: 34). This is the only section of the novel – a very short one indeed, seven pages of the total one hundred and sixty – where a real lesbian character is present who, as Ṭurayyā does not love her, will confront a sad deception.<sup>4</sup>

*Malāmiḥ* was received very badly in Saudi Arabia, where it underwent censorship, but it also had no really good reviews in the West, and it remains untranslated until today. Once again, the novel tells us the story of a woman, a sad one, and homosexuality is portrayed as an alternative to the violence of a male world and especially to the hypocrisy of the Saudi society, except in the case of Hind. The latter is indeed a performative character in the novel structure, but has to face disappointment, as a lesbian relation cannot “be” in a society, which founds itself on a binary basis. In fact, it seems that Ṭurayyā remains at the edges of her society, because she does not choose a lesbian relationship and can imagine the life of a woman only beside a man, as she repeatedly stresses throughout the text. This novel, as the other by the same author, addresses female homosexuality as the only one way in which women can respond to heteropatriarchal discourse. This is the reason why, in my opinion, on the one hand *Malāmiḥ*, although representing a step further in relation to *Cinnamon*, does not achieve the expression of a homosexual character as performative. On the other hand, contrary to what some scholars have stressed (Soraya Altorki 2010), it is a well-structured novel, whose meaning is broader than a simple anthropological experiment and has literary value.

<sup>4</sup> The character will attempt suicide and the chapter ends with Hind asking herself at times what is Ṭurayyā doing. Part four narrates the story of Ṭurayyā’s son, who joins a fundamentalist cell and perishes in Afghanistan; part five describes the life of the protagonist after the death of her son until her death.

A very different approach is the one of *Al-Āḥarūna* (The Others) by Ṣibā al-Ḥariz, also from Saudi Arabia<sup>5</sup>. This novel too aroused great debate among scholars and reviewers in the Arab world. In view of the reaction in her country, the author uses a pen name in order not to be condemned, as happened to Zaynab Ḥifnī.<sup>6</sup> The novel structure is threefold: in part one, which opens with a quote by Jean-Paul Sartre (*L'enfer c'est les autres*, translated as: Hell is other people), the reader is literally thrown into the intimate stream of consciousness of the main character, whose name he will never know, and of her having a sexual experience with Dāy, a female fellow student:

I hung onto the mirror, my flagrant nakedness sending me into a state of rapture I had never experienced before, a feeling of bliss at seeing myself desired like this, and escaping the laws mandated by my own body (Ṣiba al-Ḥariz 2006: 8; Siba al-Harez 2009: 81).

This section is a long interior monologue, which not only describes the attitude of the female protagonist towards what happens to her, but also presents a detailed description of Saudi society, especially of the Shiite community where the heroine comes from. In a close community like that of the village she lives in, the first reaction to her experience can only be repulsion:

My filthiness is not the kind I can wash away with soap and water. I am tired of repeatedly washing my hands and my mouth, tired of bathing so often, tired of the fear I cannot help feeling every time I sleep on my back or part my legs. After all, of this has happened, I cannot wipe an enormous eraser across my body and mind to bring back the whiteness of their surface, the whiteness of the page. Dai sliced me into two parts: my body, glorying in its confections, and my self, so determined on purification from its offences (Ṣibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 12; Ṣibā al-Harez 2009: 120).

In the novel, it appears clear how Saudi society is a male one, where the male has the power and which has no mercy for those trying to walk another path. The female protagonist undergoes a new perception of her body, “in a state of estrangement from myself, while my body began to truly harass me with its demands” (Ṣibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 18; Ṣibā al-Harez 2009: 233). In any case the relationship with Dāy is one of possession too, which reproduces the male norm and the heroine is only an object in her lover’s hands.

At the year’s end, she gave me my diploma signed off with her professional moniker. My diploma was a sentence she wrote in black ink onto my body. You are a possession of mine and of mine alone (Ṣibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 46; Ṣibā al-Harez 2009: 694).

The relationship between Dāy and the heroine continues, threatened always by the power the former tries to have over the other, and a sort of violence Dāy is somehow pleased to bestow. In the background, we learn that the heroine suffers from epilepsy, clear expression of her un-wellbeing in the society she lives in, and

<sup>5</sup> The novel’s title comes from *The Others* (2001), a movie by Alejandro Amenábar, featuring Nicole Kidman and inspired by Henry James novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

<sup>6</sup> The English translator too did not want to be mentioned in the English translation of the novel. In fact, it says: “The name of the translator is not listed here at the translator’s request” (Ṣibā al-Harez 2009, colophon). The novel has been published in Italian too, translated by Lorenzo Declich and Daniele Mascitelli (Ṣibā al-Harez 2009). In any case, the question of self-censorship has to be studied, because it is not sure whether the reason is the presence of a homosexual character. It could rather be the critical approach towards Saudi society in general.



that she had a brother she really loved, who died. At some point Dāy introduces the heroine to her girlfriends, among them Dārīn: “The best way I can put it is that the flesh of her hand had gone deep inside of me and flung everything there into disarray” (Şibā al-Harez 2009: 1761). The encounter marks the beginning of part two, whose quote is taken from the movie *The Others*: “No door should be opened before the previous one has been closed” (Şibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 161; Şibā al-Harez 2009: 2293).

The relationship with Dārīn evolves in a very different way and the heroine fails to be somehow born again with her:

With Dareen, I felt I had enough reassurance to set my heart down next to us on the table, without having to fear that she would steal it if I stopped paying attention to it, or to her. Not because she could not steal it, not because she did not want to steal it, but because she had understood instinctively from the very beginning how badly I was a losing mare in this race, and so she spared me a lot of hardship by placing no bets on me.

With Dareen, I began to discover my body as if it were something new. She would lure me slowly, lighting two candles and whispering scandalous things that made my skin tremble to hear them. She stayed neutral when there were wars between me and my body, even though I sought to embroil her in those conflicts between us. That parts of my body had their names, one by one, even the most secret; our moments had their private and special expressions; and what I would have believed was a cheap expression unbecoming to Dareen and her immense daintiness turned out, I discovered, to provide a kind of grimy tonic. Who said that mire does not touch or arouse you? Our physical relationship was sex, and not what I was used to calling it, allusively and euphemistically: that (Şibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 178; Şibā al-Harez 2009: 2581).

The guilt feeling too seems to fade to leave room for discussion: if God created us like this why should we feel dirty? A fundamental question, to which the novel unfortunately gives no answer.

Growing up – the novel begins with the heroine not even eighteen and ends when she is twenty-two – the protagonist learns better how to manage relationships; so *The Others*, once again, can be read as the story of an education path from oppression if not to emancipation (because impossible in the Saudi society) at least to self consciousness. This part of the book then presents the relationships the protagonist has with women in general and with two of them in particular; the latter are not love affairs but sex relationships showing an evolution from desperation to awareness. The awareness of her sexuality makes the heroine remark that she has never known a man, or better, she has never felt nor imagined the desire for a man:

When I said to Dareen, What I long for in you is a man, but it's a man who will never show up, she whispered into my ear, I wish I could be that man.

But I do not expect anyone, I answered with truly lofty hauser.

Without knowing it, she drew my attention to the entity missing in my life. There had never been a man, never at all. In my remotest hopes, in my very feeblest and most secret thoughts about the future, there never ever had been a man (Şibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 216; Şibā al-Harez 2009: 3204).

She then tries to have a relationship with Rayyān, but this, although described with a beginning a culmination and an end, remains a virtual one, as they know each other only through the Internet and through long telephone calls. In any case, the female protagonist begins to turn to the world of men, and in this part, the fact

that she “is” not a homosexual is underlined more than once. In the last chapter of part two, the girl talks with ‘Umar, another longtime friend, and tells him everything about her sexual experiences until that day.

At this point, there is a caesura in the novel stressed by a quote taken from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*: “Nobody comes, nothing happens”. From this point on, part three begins and the novel turns to the men’s world and their relation with the heroine.

In fact we are informed that she goes once more to Dāy to see her for the last time and to “close the door” to homosexual life in order to open a new one, that of the world of men, even though the reader remains uncertain about the reason why she does it. The last chapter shows us the young woman with ‘Umar, the net friend she has had since the beginning of the novel<sup>7</sup>, and whom she finally decides to meet. When she meets him the word that more often recurs is “real”, as what she experienced before him was not:

Take me, Umar. Take all of me!

And he did. Not as Dai did in all of our scrabbles in bed, nor in the state of lightness I had gone through with Dareen, nor in the fear and shame I had felt having a strong and forceful heel pressing down on my body for years. Now and then, out of an extreme of desire or love, I would be on the point of saying, Don’t stay outside of me! Don’t steal your children from me! But I held back, afraid that such big words would frighten him (Şibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 284; Şibā al-Harez 2009: 4307).

There is no happy end here, only the promise not to let her down (Şibā al-Ḥariz 2006: 287). And to be real, in contrast to the “others”, as well as also the reference to the movie, reminds the reader (where the “others” are ghosts). It seems that the author warns the reader: Everybody I described throughout the book were ghosts, only man is reality. Despite this reading, *Al-āḥarūna* is a very well written and structured novel, which should deserve more attention by scholars.

Looking at the three novels together, there are some common features that can be identified, following Sedgwick’s idea of a binary heteronormative system. Sedgwick says that Western<sup>8</sup> culture is organized around the binary idea of homosexual/heterosexual. This idea has influenced and determined all other binary couples at the base of epistemological and power relations through which we have access to knowledge. Among them, feminine/masculine, truth/paranoia, health/illness, natural/unnatural (Sedgwick 1990). The power discourse, through other related discourses such as law, medicine and *literature*, makes our perception of the world possible only through this binary system, and therefore we can perceive sex only as heteronormative (woman/man), and can read reality only through a sexual lens. If a deconstruction through these novels is ongoing, this should mean breaking these binary couples, and queering the “malestream” canon, because “the binary system is heteronormative, thus queer theory avoids binary and hierarchical reasoning in general and in connection with sex and gender in particular” (Mimi Marinucci 2010: 50).

<sup>7</sup> The name of the boy, ‘Umar, reminds the reader that he is a sunnī, that is, not a Shiite as the heroine.

<sup>8</sup> I consider Arab culture as Western.

All the novels discussed here rely on a binary structure, which sees an opposition much or less emphasized between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Although all the main characters have a homosexual relationships – and it is even more difficult to discern if it is a love relationship or just a sexual one – in the end they all return to the “man”. This occurs to ‘Aliyā, who returns to her family home where she will find the ghost of her father, the one who sold her; to Ṭurayyā, who in reality never left the patriarchal structure, and to the heroine of *The Others*, whose story ends with the sexual relation with a young man under the quote that opens the third part of the novel: “Nobody comes, nothing happens”, to stress that all she experienced before has not changed the performative character of gender relations. Another binary couple is the one represented by the opposition between urban and provincial life. In this case too, we can notice this opposition in all the novels above mentioned: *Cinnamon* reproduces an opposition between a country girl and her bourgeois mistress, whose life is rooted in an urban milieu; *Malāmiḥ* offers a description of the contrast of two cities, Jeddah and Riyad, opposed to the West (London); the background to *The Others* is the village of al-Qaif, from where the heroine comes, opposed to Riyad. In all the novels it is also possible to find another opposition, the one between a girl or young woman and an older woman, as for example Ḥanān to ‘Aliyā, Ṭurayyā to the other women in Riyyad, the heroine of *The Others* to her mother. This means that the novels’ structure does not challenge the heteropatriarchal norm and that therefore the presence of a female homosexual character is only functional to reproduce the male structure of society.

The novel that represents the act of saying one’s own homosexuality perhaps for the first time in the Arabic language is *Ana hiya anti* (I am you, in the feminine gender) by the Lebanese author Ilhām Maṣṣūr. Sihām, the heroine, has been attracted to women since her youth and lives her first sexual experience with a fellow student, Claire, as she studies in Paris. It is again in Paris that she falls in love with Layāl, her degree supervisor. She develops a sort of obsession for the teacher, and this inevitably shines through the Sapphic poems she writes and Layāl revises. Layāl is the love object of Mīmī too, a married woman who lives in the same building and who no longer finds pleasure in the relationship with her husband. That marks the difference with the aforementioned novels, since here one perceives a change in the narrative proposal being all the text centred on the relationships that protagonists interweave with each other. They are not uncertain about their sexual orientation – even though Sihām, for example, accepts it with some difficulty, and we can read the novel too as her journey to self-recognition – nor are they obliged to carry out the homosexual act for some reasons nor do they feel guilty. The focus is rather on living one’s own sexuality peacefully and openly in a society, i.e., the Arab one, which condemns it.

Sihām succeeds in overcoming the clash between the desire to be who she is and the rules bound to gender and class in Lebanese society. She succeeds in expressing herself in what Samar Ḥabīb, who deeply studied the novel, calls a lesbian discourse (Samar Habib 2007); although still at an embryonic stage, it is expressed in a deeply different way than in *Cinnamon* or *Al-āḥarūna*, as for example:

Nothing arouses me except the female form, for the female body has a great effect on me and it is what awakens desire within me. What am I guilty of exactly if I can only feel the pleasure

of love with a woman? It's love, and the purpose of making love is attaining pleasure and satisfaction (Ilhām Maṣṣūr 2000: 170. All translations by Samar Habib).

The self-consciousness about the concept that saying is existing is fully present in the novel. Sihām seeks reasons for her homosexuality but in the end she comes together with herself because nothing has to be justified and:

As for us here [homosexuality] is muffled because we are still in the magical pattern of thought. *We think that being silent about a reality of some sort enables us to eliminate it. Yes, eliminate it from our thoughts, so that it nests in our bodies and our subconscious and that it reflects itself throughout all our behaviour without our knowledge* (Ilhām Maṣṣūr 2000: 59-60. Italics are mine).

The background of the novel is, in this case too, the relation among classes. Sihām comes from a bourgeois family, well-described in the relationship she entertains with her mother and in the relation/opposition with the West represented by Claire, the French friend. The opposition between the way Claire and Sihām live their homosexuality is exemplified by Sihām calling Arab society the City of Mint, and the French society the City of Saffron.<sup>9</sup> The City of Mint's women go out at night seeking for a bridge to pass to the other side. But in vain.

The overcoming of this symbolic bridge is represented in the novel by the relationship between Claire and Sihām. Claire embodies the possibility of overcoming the constriction of the Arab society as she guides Sihām where the borderline between the active and the passive element and the female/male role in the lesbian experience are obsolete.

Claire unveils the treasures of her body and the sun intermixes with the waves and the berries emerge deliciously and it's time to eat, Claire devours passion and finds pleasure, she knows the secrets of love and its ways and she flirts, Claire and freedom is in her dress, she undresses, she does not want to remain a prisoner, and she blows her cigarettes in a blonde cup, so who is Claire drinking and who is drinking her? (Ilhām Maṣṣūr 2000: 73).

Building relationships, articulating them, setting bridges is what undermines the norm. It is a new kind of methodology, the methodology of the oppressed which, intersecting questions of gender and class, enables a different consciousness. This involves not only the creation and the analysis of texts, but also the creation of a social movement. In this way, the unspeakable can be said – and therefore it creates reality – through and against power. In this novel, although some of the patriarchal binary structure is present (for example in the relationship between Sihām and her mother, in the role played by war, and in the description of a provincial society as opposed to the urban Paris), we can detect a new approach in the way the main character feels and most of all acts in relation to her homosexuality.

In conclusion, in modern and contemporary times the shift has been from citing the homosexual character as functional to a literary strategy relating to the sexual act as a symbol for something else (usually in the negative) to the outing of the heroine/hero's sexual orientation. If the first method of treating homosexuality in literature never aroused critics or censure, the second one had as a result a negative attitude among scholars, who refused to assign literary value to those novels.

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<sup>9</sup> Saffron is here the allusion to the fact that in Arabic lesbians are named *saḥḥaqa*, from a verb which means "to rub" used to denote the act of "rubbing" saffron between the hand palms to separate it.

The reception of these novels in the Arab world as in the West, in fact, should be the object of further research in order to investigate in which way they can redefine the literary canon both in the Arab countries and in the works of scholars who make research about Arab literature.

This roughly outlined path seems to be of great interest. The presence of female homosexuality in literature as presented in this paper invites us as scholars not to make the mistake of defining “Arab woman” or “Arab lesbian” as a thing in itself, but to try to reveal its relations to other things or people. Doing so we can disclose the structure by which the language of supremacy is said, and deconstructing it, let a new one be uttered, therefore being useful to articulate anew the literary discourse not only referring to Arabic literature but also to literature in a broader sense.

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