Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature

Hanadi Al-Samman
University of Virginia

Abstract
Although a great deal of research and criticism has been done on homoerotic desire in Arabo-medieval adab literature, very little has been written on its representation in modern Arabic literature. In order to address this scholarly gap, my study poses the following questions: why is there an increase of homosexual and lesbian characters, at this contemporary juncture, in Arabic fiction? And what are the effects of such an exposure on the status of Arab gay rights? I argue that depictions of male homosexuality in contemporary texts draw on power dialectics of master/slave, active/passive and local/colonial, and as such reflect a sense of overall powerlessness, inferiority and alienation from the political process, while underscoring the Arab male’s loss of manhood and of self. In contrast, female homosexuality remains locked into traditional, heterocentric discourse which claims that lesbianism exists only as a prelude to, or as a temporary replacement of ‘normative’ heterosexuality, thus undermining the validity of lesbian body politics. Contrary to the medieval tradition which allowed more fluidity in the depiction of same-sex definitions and practices, and acknowledged the variants of homoerotic desire and action, contemporary Arab cultural and literary engagements of the topic overlook the biological aspect of this desire. Furthermore, they project gay encounters as a symptom of the social deterioration caused by political and economic oppression of the Arab citizen. I conclude that more attention must be given to the biological essence of sexual differentiation, to the body politics rather than gender politics, if the emergence of a recognized, outspoken Arab homosexual or lesbian identity is ever to be realized.

Keywords
Modern Arabic novel, Homosexuality, Lesbianism, Emasculation, Medieval same-sex tradition

The representation of homosexual and lesbian characters is certainly not a novel trend in Arabic literature. The adab medieval tradition abounds in works discussing this subject matter, among them the explicit khamriya (wine poetry) of the ’Abbāsid poet Abū Nuwās (d. 815 A.D.),1 Mufākharat al-Jawārī

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wa-al-Ghilmān by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/869 A.D.),² the Maqāmāt of Bādī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008 A.D.),³ and the treatises of al-Tīfāshī (d. 1253),⁴ and al-Nafzāwī (d. 1324 A.D.).⁵ However, male or female homosexuality has definitely not been the norm in modern Arabic literature, that is, not until the publication of a host of recent novels having homosexual/lesbian characters as central or secondary figures. This study traces the shift in cultural attitudes towards same-sex relations from early Islamic, medieval, premodern Arab world, to the present. This vast temporal leap is necessary to pinpoint the exact juncture when the Arab homoerotic lexicon loses its cultural specificity, and starts to acquire imported system valuation and foreign signification brought upon by the colonial experience, and exasperated by the aborted national projects of most postcolonial Arab nations. Reading fiction as a civilizational allegory, I will uncover the function of these homoerotic representations, and address the reasons behind such an increase at this point in time, and the effect of this increased exposure on the status of gay Arabic literature. I will further argue that the resulting explosion of same-sex representations is a symptom of the Western physical and cultural invasion of Arab lands and the increasing sense of emasculation felt by the Arab male. Seen in this light, these depictions rarely propel the gay rights debate in the Arab world towards a greater understanding of the intrinsic biological components of sexual difference. Rather they function as revolting metaphors of personal and national dispossession, of social and political decadence, thus, locking the argument in traditional modes of heterosexual representation instead.

Before unraveling the complicated issue of gay representations in modern Arabic literature, an overview of the status of same-sex, particularly homoerotic relationships in early Islamic, medieval, and premodern Arabic literary and juridical texts is in order. This is necessary in order to mark the vast changes in homoerotic epistemology that occurred on the levels of both the linguistic lexicon, and its application as revealed in these texts. These changes happened, sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century at the outset of Western/Middle Eastern colonial

and cultural exchange, as a result of what Joseph Massad calls the “assimilationist project of rewriting not only the Arab past but also the Arab present in accordance with European concepts of civilization and culture, with the goal of demonstrating that desiring Arabs are no different from desiring Europeans.”

Reviewing the aforementioned homoerotic tradition reveals a cultural recognition of a wide array of sexual practices and roles spelled out meticulously in the linguistic variants attributed to them, and debated heavily in religious and judicial proceedings. For example, we encounter the following terms: a *mukhannath* (an effeminate man whose cross-gender behavior in voice and in gaiety, and later in dress, resemble women but does not necessarily indicate the latter’s desire to be penetrated by a man), a *lūṭī* (a pederast who desire to have same-sex intercourse strictly with pre-pubescent boys), a *mā ḏūn* (a man desiring to be penetrated by other men, often as a result of a pathological condition), and *liwāṭ* (in strict religious definitions, the term means anal intercourse between men).

Furthermore, the literature in question recognized various forms of homoerotic desire: passionate infatuation (Platonic love of an adult male to a youth without physical intercourse, often seen as a form of aesthetic, cultural refinement and, at times, as a way of loving an omnipresent God), and lust (the physical consummation of the homosexual act). The diversity of this homoerotic lexicon resurfaces in judicial verdicts referencing the category of the act, the type of the perpetrator(s), and focusing on punishing actions but not

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7 See, for example, Everett Rowson, “The Effemimates of Early Medina” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 3:4 (1991): 671-693. Particularly the section on the singer and effeminate Ṭuways (632-711) whose *takhannuth* (effeminate nature) did not have any homosexual tendencies. Indeed, according to Rowson, Ṭuways “is reported to have married and fathered children.” p. 681.


9 Citing Dāwūd al-ʾAntākī (d. 1599) who discussed, in his medical treatise, “the etiology of the disease.” El-Rouayheb states that *Ubnah* was considered “to be caused by the presence of a boric substance (*māddah būrāqīyyah*) in the veins of the rectum, which burns and tickles the anus until it becomes like an itching wound, inducing the person with the disease to seek to have his anus penetrated.” Al-ʾAntākī goes on to prescribe herbal medial applications to treat it. See Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, pp. 18-19.

10 Ibid., p. 16.

11 Ibid., pp. 3-4, 53-110. Specifically, see the religious ruling on the permissibility of falling in love with a boy, or expressing this love in verse as long as there is no physical consummation of this Platonic love. El-Rouayheb cites the example of the Egyptian scholar and rector of the Azhar college in Cairo, ʾAbdallah al-Shabrāwī (d. 1758), who was infatuated with a young boy to whom he dedicated poems in his *Dīwān* (poetry collection).
desires or inclinations. While issuing a verdict on those who insult their peers by using the term *mukhannath*, for example, the Egyptian jurist ʿĀḥmad al-Dardīr (d. 1786) “asserted that someone who calls a man a *mukhannath* has made such an accusation, and is thus bound to substantiate his claim or face punishment for slander. This is so, wrote Dardīr, even if the person swears that he only intended the strict lexical meaning of the term.” In the first century of the Islamic period and as late as the late eighteenth century, it was understood that the words *mukhannath* and *maʿbūn* are not exactly synonymous, though in later periods both terms seem to collapse into our modern-day understanding of the term homosexual. It was “recognized that it was possible to be outwardly effeminate without being a passive sodomite,” or to be a *maʿbūn* while trying to hide your biological urge under the guise of fake masculinity. In addition to acknowledging same-sex desire as a natural, trait which is allowed to exist without punishment and is distinctly separate from the actual act of *liwāt* punishable by both the religious and the juridical systems. Medieval and premodern Arabic literature recognized the physical causation of same-sex inclinations, particularly in reference to *ubnah* (man’s desire to be penetrated by another man) and *siḥaq* (female homoeroticism), that were believed to originate from an innate chemical imbalance. *Ubnah*, for example, while still morally reprehensible, was thought to be caused by a “boric substance (*māddah būrāqiyyah*)” in the veins of the rectum that generates an itch and a desire for relief of this sensation through penetration. Likewise, *siḥaq* was believed to originate from either hot vapors gathering betwixt the labia majora which generate an itch that cannot be appeased but by the rubbing and the cold ejaculate of another woman, or the origin could be anatomical due to a birth defect creating a short vagina that makes a heterosexual intercourse extremely painful for the afflicted woman. Most

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12 Ibid., 153.
13 Ibid., p.22.
14 For an account on homosexuality’s early use in modern Arabic literature, specifically Najīb Mahfūz’s *Midaq Alley* (1947), see Joseph Massad’s discussion of the novel in Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, pp.272-290. To account for the incompatibility of the term “homosexuality” with the earlier Arabic medieval terms denoting homoeroticism, I will be using the terms “same-sex relations” and “homoerotic desire” interchangeably to refer to the medieval range of homoerotic lexicon, while reserving the use of the term “homosexuality” to the discussion of the modern Arabic fictional texts.
15 See Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, p. 22. Such as the case with the singer and the effeminate Ṭuways (632-711) mentioned above in note 7.
16 Ibid., p. 19. Also see note 9 above.
17 See the chapter on “*Adab al-Subq wa al-Musāhigât*” in Shīhāb al-Dīn al-Tīfāshī, *Nuzhat al-Albāb fīmā lā Yūjad fī Kitāb*, pp. 235-247. Al-Tīfāshī distinguishes between the ejaculate of
pertinent to our discussion, in my opinion, is the fact 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. 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.

Arabic medieval literature’s treatment of male and female same-sex relationships falls under the umbrella of adab al-zurafāʾ (wittiness/entertainment literature) written during the time when the ʿAbbāsid Islamic Empire (750-1258 A.D.) was at the pinnacle of prosperity and world dominance. Written in a typical pros and cons style of this era, al-Jāhiz’s Muṣṭakharat al-Jawārī wa-al-Ghilmān is but one of the numerous Arabic medieval texts that deal with the advantages/disadvantages of same-sex versus heterosexual love. In a modern debate style two patrons of male and female slaves, ghilmān and jawārī respectively, reiterate the advantages of owning a ghulām (a young male slave) versus a jārīyyah (a female slave). For example, the female patron mentions that using a female slave for sexual gratification does not violate any religious admonitions against liwāt; such as those mentioned in both the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth. Furthermore, being in love with a woman confirms old Arabia’s standards of the beloved’s aesthetics canonized by renowned jahiliyyah poets. To that argument the male patron responds that those religious admonitions are made for those who care more for the hereafter than the pleasures of daily life, and that the harsh Bedouin nature of Arabia’s poets made them unappreciative of the luxuries and pleasures of homoerotic relationships. The joust continues and the jawārī patron further states that it is more advantageous to own a jārīyyah since her years of sexual service could well exceed forty years compared to only a short period of time in the case of a ghulām.

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20 Ghilmān/Male slaves are boys who did not reach adolescence. Though biologically males, they are not considered to be “complete” men in the social and cultural sense. El-Rouayheb...
This perceived advantage is undermined easily by the ghilmān patron who points out the forty-day waiting period imposed on a new male owner before approaching his new jāriyyah so as to rule out any previous pregnancies. He states eloquently:

One of the faults of girls is that when a man buys a bondwoman, he is forbidden the enjoyment of anything from her before the period which determines she is not pregnant has passed. The servant boy does not require that. The poet has said:

My life for yours; I have chosen you purposely,
Because you do not menstruate or give birth.21

The scope of homoeroticism encountered in Arabic medieval literature ranges from sheer Platonic love, as I discussed earlier, to manifestations of homoerotic desire. It is also manifested in accounts celebrating the physical fulfillment of said desire. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Tīfāshī’s Nuzhat al-Albāb fīmā lā Yūjad fī Kitāb, for example, presents a wide array of male and female heterosexual and same-sex relationships. In the introduction to the chapter entitled “Fi Nawādir Akhbār al-Lātāh wa-Milḥ ‘Ash‘ārihim,” (The Most Unusual Facts about Homosexuals and the Most Entertaining Poems Written by Them), al-Tīfāshī recognizes the need to obscure the names of the high-ranking same-sex officials so as to shelter them from public criticism. He points out that,

...a great many of the literati, as well as the majority of the members of the upper crust of society, belong to the ranks of homosexuals. We have accordingly thought it wiser not to spell out their names, so as not to tarnish their reputations, the more so as quite a few of them indulge in these practices only out of a taste for elegance, impelled by a love much more intellectual than physical, finding in them principally an exercise for the mind, an enchantment propitious to the development of the intelligence, a method open to all for refining the faculties of understanding and discernment, as well as a manner of distancing themselves from the simplistic ideas about life held by the common people.22

observes that “this intermediate status was symbolized by the lack of the most visible of male sex characteristics: a beard.” See Khaled El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800, p. 26.


Al-Tīfāshī acknowledges in his treatise two kinds of homoerotic desires: the Platonic love interest of the most pious Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī who was infatuated with ghilmān “seeking only the scopic satisfaction of his desire rather than physical intercourse.”23 And the illicit desires of a devout Damascene Sūfī who wished that the Ayyūbid ruler al-Malik al-Muʿazzam (d.1227 A.D.) would order him, under the threat of beheading, to drink wine and commit an immoral act with a beautiful youth so that he could be absolved of the responsibility of these two sins at judgment day! Of most importance, in my opinion, is the anecdote, narrated by al-Jammāz who recounts that he heard Abū Nuwās say “I desire something that cannot be found in life and in the hereafter.” Al-Jammāz replies, “Woe unto you, Paradise has what pleases the eyes, and what the soul desires.” Then Abū Nuwās said, “It is just as I said. I desire to be legally with a youth without committing a mortal sin.” Al-Jammāz’s reply was, “As God is my witness! That is one desire I think you will never succeed in satisfying!”24 The Arabic phrase that Abū Nuwās used “Ashtabi Ghulāman ḥalāllan” is a highly charged one. It does not only profess his homoerotic desire, but also aims at legalizing it socially and religiously in the same way a heterosexual relationship is recognized publicly by the marriage bond. The noun ḥalāl (that which is allowed, permissible) comes from the Arabic trilateral verbal root ḥilla with meanings of: to untie, to unravel, to solve a problem, and to be permitted or lawful in its ḥilla format. Solving the problem of homoeroticism from the complexity of its unlawful juridical status is what is desired here. What Abū Nuwās is really asking for is a legal recognition of his desire for the youth signified by the word ḥalāl. This request to “normalize” homoerotic desire constitutes a juridical transgression, as al-Jammāz suggests, and as such is impossible to fulfill neither in Abū Nuwās’ life, nor in the hereafter. As I stated earlier, social acceptance of homoeroticism under the auspices of the medieval ghilmān system was meant to be complementary to heterosexuality, and not substitutive or egalitarian to it.

What the previous examples of Arabic medieval literature demonstrate is the prevalence of homoerotic tendencies, a highly sophisticated level of expressing intricate and various forms of same-sex desire, an awareness of the Qur’ānic admonitions against them, and a need to contain these desires by restricting them to the ghilmān male slave system where “theoretically” neither the active mature male, nor the pre-adolescent youth stand to lose their masculine attributes or their full induction into the patriarchal system. The ghilmān system offered an avenue to freely and scrupulously express homoerotic desires, and

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to legitimize the enactment of these desires albeit within the context of a “normative” heterosexual society.

By contrast, modern Arabic homoerotic literature does not offer the same guiltless stance. When the 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. Recent gay literature falls into two groups. On the one hand, some texts represent homosexuality as a byproduct of active/passive, master/slave power relations with local and colonial powers, or as the result of pervasive and exploitive societal practices or child abuse. These less-than-complimentary representations cast the homosexual encounter itself in the form of a rape. For example, the relationship of Farah and his patron Nishān in al-Sammān’s Bayrūt’75 (Beirut’75, 75), Ḥātim’s relationship with the poor ‘Abduh in Imārat Yaʿqūbyān (Yacoubian Building, 2002), or even the exploitive encounters of Najib Mahfūz’s Kirsha with the underprivileged boys in Zuqāq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley, 1948) all conform to this pattern. Indeed, this consumer/object dialectic dominates most homosexual relationships represented in contemporary Arabic literature, thus perpetuating the same old essentialist, classist, hetero-normative paradigms.

On the other hand, and only in a few representative texts, one can find sympathetically rendered characters portraying true humane emotions that focus on the essence of same-sex relations and the individual’s biological difference from heterosexuals. Characters such as Khalīl in Ḥajar al-Dāhik (The Stone of Laughter, 1990) and Sihām in Ilhām Manṣūr’s Anā Hiya Anti (I am you, 2000) are successful in tapping into the essence of biological sexual difference.

As for the depiction of female homosexuality, most of the works discussed below still fall prey to the same Marxist power relations that present female homoerotic desire as a substitute or a prelude to “normative” and everlasting heterosexuality. These lesbian encounters are often experienced as an outlet

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from excessive patriarchal restrictions or societal gender divisions, or as compensating for husbands who are absent or incapable of satisfying their wives. The fleeting relationship between the Lebanese Suhā and the Saudi Nūr in Ḥānān al-Shaykh’s *Misk al-Ghazāl* (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, 1988), for example, is a good testament to this kind of reductive portrayal. Representing female homosexuality in this manner undermines the legitimacy of female body politics and locks it permanently in the role of a prelude to dominant heterosexuality.

Earlier portrayals of homosexual characters have been cameos at best, draped in the judgmental cloak of puritanical Islamic ethics, for example, the character of Kirsha, the café owner in Najib Mahfūz’s *Zuqāq al-Midaq* (*Midaq Alley*). Despite his marriage, children, and grandchildren, Kirsha is unabashedly belligerent about his sexual orientation and his preference for male youths. At times the narrative offers candid insights into Kirsha’s feelings for his male lovers and his frustration at society’s moral judgments of him; however, it falls short of casting him in a sympathetic light. Indeed, his homosexual desires are often portrayed as a form of perversion and his life as “a most irregular life[,] he had rolled in its dirt so long that it appeared to him a perfectly normal one.” Indeed, Mahfūz’s narrator declares that “normal life had eluded him and he had become a prey to perversions.”

The reference to the “normality,” or lack thereof, of homoerotic desire finds its echo, as I have argued above, in the medieval Arabic literary canon and also in present day Arabic cultural debates. In the process of these debates, one finds that homosexuality has often been aligned with the diabolical, as the work of Iblīs, and in Mahfūz’s *Midaq Alley*, homosexuality is referred to as “the will of the devil” by one of the pious men of the alley, Radwān al-Ḥussāiny. The latter warns Kirsha to “give up this boy; he is just filth created by Satan.” The association of homosexuality with immorality is later cemented in the reader’s mind through the introduction of Sūsū, a cross-dressing dance instructor, who, along with his boss/pimp Faraj Ibrāhīm, is instrumental in initiating the main female character, Ḥāmīda, into the illicit path of prostitution. Sūsū’s role in the moral demise of Ḥāmīda and Mahfūz’s description of his “thin effeminate voice” and the rest of his mannerisms brings to mind the *khawālāt*

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32 Ibid., pp. 96-97.

33 Ibid., p. 218.
characters of early Egyptian cinema and the effeminates of early Medina of the seventh to twelfth centuries. Indeed, the 1963 film adaptation of the novel further cements Sūsū’s homosexuality, in the audience minds, as a comic transvestite and an imported form of sexual deviancy associated with the modernized/westernized, colonial moral values that are so alien to the traditional values of the alley itself. Perhaps to downplay Kirsha’s homosexuality in the movie, we find his representation to be more in line with the medieval pederasts description where his exaggerated masculinity (complete with a set of oversized moustaches) remains intact. Some critics have argued that the judgmental pronouncements against homosexuality in Midaq Alley marks the beginning of the change of Arab cultural attitudes towards homoeroticism as a result of assimilating orientalizing, colonialist mores condemning the practice. This critique is certainly supported by the creation of two models of homosexuals: the traditional, active pederast Kirsha whose homosexuality, faithful to medieval taxonomy, is a complement to his normative heterosexuality, and Sūsū whose transvestitism denotes an exclusive choice of homosexuality, a moral degradation, and passive masculinity. This alien, diminutive role of homoeroticism does not even find a linguistic equivalence in Mahfūz’s post World War II Egyptian world yet, and so the Sūfī character Sheik Darwish resorts to the English linguistic canon to describe it for his Egyptian compatriots. “In English they call it ‘homosexuality’ and it is spelled h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l-i-t-y.” In the world of Midaq Alley, homosexuality maintained some of its old medieval fluidity, and the degenerative aspects of it were prevented from spreading to the rest of the Egyptian society by restricting it to the “amoral” class of pimps, dancers, and singers. In later novelistic depictions, however, this alien contaminate spreads to every aspect of Arab life, and becomes both the cause and the symptom of societal and national disintegration, and a trope signifying local, colonial, and postcolonial domination, and in turn, emasculation of the Arab citizen.

34 See, for example, Garay Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film” Middle East Report. 206 (1998): 32-36.
37 See Joseph Massad, Desiring Arabs, pp. 272-290.
38 Naguib Mahfouz, Midaq Alley, p. 104.
Homosexuality and Power

Al-Sammān’s Bayrūt’75 (Beirut’75, 1975), often celebrated for correctly isolating the socio-economic and political ailments of Lebanese society that exploded into the sixteen-year-long civil war, features a homosexual relationship with the trappings of a dominant, active/passive heterosexual relationship. Farah is one of four main characters who meet in a taxicab on their journey from Damascus to Beirut in search of social freedom and better opportunities. Farah, who comes from a peasant Syrian family of modest means, is directed to contact a distant relative in Beirut in order to launch his singing career. Upon meeting this talent promoter, Nīshān, Farah realizes that the price he has to pay to be the “singer of manliness” is to succumb obediently to Nīshān’s sexual advances. Nīshān’s ultimatum, “Are you prepared to pay the price? The price is, first of all, obedience—absolute obedience to me . . .,”39 emphasizes the master/slave, non-egalitarian aspect of their impending relationship.

The narrator’s description of Farah’s reaction to Nīshān’s proposal marks the beginning of a dehumanizing, symbolic transformation of the passive same-sex partner into an animal. This transformation is complete when, towards the end of the novel, Farah starts howling like a wounded dog instead of singing. By conjuring the imagery of Christopher Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus,40 the narrator further portrays the homosexual encounter as a contract with the devil:

There was something vicious and hard in Nishan’s voice, like the crack of the trainer’s whip on the bodies of circus animals. Without knowing why, Farah was reminded of the story of the man who signed a pact in blood with Satan, in which he agreed to give his soul to the devil if the latter would fulfill all of his desires. What was the man’s name? May be it was Farah—or was it Faust?41

The congruence of Farah’s character with that of Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus underscores the manipulative aspect of the homosexual relationship, represented in the bourgeois economic control of the fate of the lower classes in post-independence era, and reinforces the Islamic view of the immorality of homosexuality. The sinful nature of the homosexual act, as explained in the Qur’ān and the Hādīth, reaches its apogee when Farah refers to Lot’s people and to the impending civil war that is to ravage Beirut in his prophetic pronouncement, “This is Sodom and Gomorrah, only bottled inside a jar!”42

41 Ghada Samman, Beirut’75, pp. 45-46.
42 Ibid., p. 110.
Nīshān and Faraḥ’s homosexual relationship is characterized by the traditional active/passive, male/female, master/slave, rich/poor dyad. The encounter itself is portrayed as a form of rape, a matter of violent, bodily invasion which later manifests itself in Faraḥ’s mental demise as well. Recalling their first encounter, Faraḥ observes that at first Nīshān’s fingers moved delicately over his skin, but that, suddenly, Nīshān’s “touch became rough and violent, like a plow going down into the soil. And then I understood . . . something inside me was breaking, shattering, and I was no longer the master of my own soul. I had sold it once and for all—to the devil.” The contradiction between the reality of Faraḥ’s imposed sexual identity as a passive homosexual partner (maʾbūn) and his façade as the “singer of manliness” creates a schism that emasculates him psychologically and also literally: he is no longer able to perform the active male role with women and reflects sadly that his own “body and soul don’t belong to [him] anymore, so how could [he] possibly hold sway over anyone else’s?” While it is true that homosexuality (liwāt) as a whole is banned by the Qurʾānic scripture and that both active and passive partners are equally incriminated in the eyes of the religious sharīʿa law, cultural practices, however, as I mentioned in my medieval survey above, particularly from the ʿAbbāsid times onward, distinguish between the active partner, who can maintain his “masculinity/normality” and even enjoy respect in society, and the passive partner, who is often cast in the degrading role of a muʾājir (the equivalent of a male prostitute). This demeaning role, which Faraḥ is forced to play, troubles his psyche; he falls prey to hallucinations, and his everyday existence becomes a nightmare, confirming Everett Rowson’s association of the word maʾbūn with “strong connotations of pathology.” Indeed, as Rowson reminds us, “ubna is in fact frequently called a “disease” (Dā). It is not surprising, then, that Faraḥ’s shattered sexual identity pushes him deeper into clinical psychoses in which he repeatedly perceives himself as a fish out of water ready to be consumed, turns to cross-dressing in order to show publicly the extent of his internal sense of emasculation, and finally ends up in an asylum. Upon his escape from the asylum, he removes the asylum sign and places it at Beirut’s outskirts in a final statement that implicates the hypocrisy and inequity of the socio-political conditions that ignited the Lebanese civil war. Indeed,

43 Ibid., p. 69. Italics mine.
44 Ibid., p. 67.
the story of pre-civil war, disintegrated, hypocritical Beirut society is told through Farah’s sexual exploitation and his consequent gender disorientation. The result is the incrimination of homosexuality as part of the moral degradation and the violent, essentialist, machismo rhetoric that hold the city’s inhabitants hostage.

Homosexuality, Muslim Brotherhood, and the State

Homosexuality does not fare much better at the hands of ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī in ‘Imārat Ya‘qūbīyān (The Yacubian Building, 2002) despite the rave reviews concerning its progressiveness in dealing with homosexuality openly and frankly. Al-Aswānī’s novel tells the different stories of the inhabitants of the Yaqubian Building, built in 1934 by an Italian architect in the ostentatious style that only the pre-revolutionary era could fully deploy. Upon its completion, the building housed only the elite of Egyptian society and later the important generals of the 1952 revolution. However, the novel takes place during the 1990’s, when the building retains only a few descendants of its previous elite clientele, in addition to various nouveaux riches, and about fifty poor families who reside on the roof. The residents of the building represent a broad segment of modern-day Egyptian society, and the plot evolves out of the tension ensuing from their discordant interactions in postcolonial and globalized Egypt.

Hātim Rashīd, the son of an Egyptian law professor and a French orientalist mother, lives in one of the apartments. Hātim inherited the apartment and a newspaper, Le Caire, from his father. He proves to be an excellent editor under whose leadership the newspaper flourishes. However, his colleagues are troubled by the peculiarity of Hātim’s sexuality. He unabashedly practices his homosexuality while still maintaining respectability and dignity at the newspaper. The narrator assures us that “Hātim Rasheed’s perversion remains merely a distant, pale shadow to his forceful, compelling professional image. [His employees] are aware of his homosexuality but do not feel it in any way in their daily dealings with him because he is serious and stern (more perhaps than is necessary).” Hātim is quite capable of separating his work and his

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46 The accomplished writer Jamāl al-Ghītanī, whose short story is the subject of our examination below, took the responsibility for serializing the novel in the literary magazine that he edits, Akhbār al-Adab. The novel is praised profusely by al-Ghītanī and nine other Arab critics for daring to break the mold of censorship, and for tapping into the pulse of modern-day Egypt. These commentaries are published in the Arabic fourth edition of the novel. See ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, ‘Imārat Ya‘qūbīyān, 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 2004), pp. 350-363.

private life. However, his stern, external professional appearance is quickly replaced in private with a persona that has the look of what Egyptian homosexuals call "kudīyānāl/passive homosexual." Yet this look is achieved without any resort to vulgar exaggerations of gayness.

Even in his bedroom with his lovers, Hatim deems himself too good for the camp taste that many homosexuals affect. He tries rather, with practiced touches, to bring out the feminine side of his beauty. He wears transparent gallabiyas embroidered with beautiful colors over his naked body, is clean shaven, applies an appropriate and carefully calculated amount of eye pencil to his eyebrows, and uses a small amount of eye shadow. Then he brushes his smooth hair back or leaves stray locks over his forehead. By these means he always attempts, in making himself attractive, to realize the model of the beautiful youth of ancient times.9

This reference to the gulām/beautiful youth of Arabic medieval times is an interesting twist to the one-dimensional, modern Arabic culture’s demeaning perception of the passive homosexual. As I argued earlier in the Arabic medieval era, a relationship between an active adult male and a passive, pre-pubescent boy was not thought to undermine the boy’s ascension to full-fledged masculinity upon reaching adolescence. Furthermore, there was a wide range of taxonomies for representing passive homosexuality which included, among others, the refined aesthetic sensibility in engaging in Platonic love with younger boys. Indeed, in certain religious circles, such as the tenth century order of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, this ardent love was a way of transmitting arts and sciences of civilization from generation to generation, and a way of loving and uniting with an omnipresent, infinitely beautiful God. Perhaps Hātim’s ability to maintain his passive homosexual persona as well as his social dignity represents a leap back in time to a moment in Arabic cultural history when the definition of masculinity was more fluid.

Thus far, we have seen a positive representation of the main gay character in the novel; Hātim is someone who can negotiate his “different” sexual orientation successfully amid rigid societal perceptions of masculine respectability. I argue, however, that Hātim’s perceived social respectability stems from his

48 Al-Aswāni points out the difference between a “kudīyānāl passive homosexual” and a “barghal/active homosexual” and the rest of the Egyptian gay scene’s terminology, “hook up” sites, and rituals in several places in the novel. See, for example, The Yacoubian Building, pp. 35-39; 222.
51 See Khaled El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800, pp. 34-36.
privileged economic status and not from a groundbreaking public change of heart regarding the modern concept of homosexuality. The reasons given for Ḥātim's homosexuality complicate this gay representation even further, in my opinion, as does his abuse of his bourgeois power, to use Marx's term, over the dispossessed, impoverished working class as represented by his lover. Ḥātim's tragic death at the hands of his ʿṢāʿīdī lover, ʿAbduh, whom he has exploited emotionally and physically, is a testimony to the shortcomings of *The Yacubian Building* in portraying homosexuality free from the oppressive trappings of Marxist economy and feudal classicism.

The narrator's description of Ḥātim's initiation into same-sex relationships at the hands of his Nubian butler Idrīs at the tender age of nine is preceded by a description of the lonely and loveless life that little Ḥātim led, deprived of the love and care of his busy professional parents. The encounter itself, though described in tender terms, carries all the signs of a sexual molestation scene, complete with the perpetrator's coupling of love with the threat of withholding that love in the future if little Ḥātim were to divulge their secret to his parents. Despite its length, the excerpt is worthy of our attention:

... One day Idris asked him to take off his clothes. Hatim was nine at the time and felt embarrassed and confused, but in the end gave in to the insistence of his friend. The latter was so aroused by the sight of his smooth, white body that during the encounter he sobbed with pleasure and whispered incomprehensible Nubian words. Idris, despite his lust and vigor, entered Ḥātim's body gently and carefully and asked him to tell him if he felt the slightest pain. This approach was so successful that when Ḥātim now thinks back to that first time with Idris, the same strange, piercing sensation that he knew that day for the first time comes back to him but he cannot remember feeling any distress at all.

When Idris was finished, he turned Ḥātim to face him and kissed him ardently on the lips, then looked into his eyes and said, “I did that because I love you. If you love me, don’t tell anyone what happened. If you tell them, they’ll beat you and throw me out and your father may put me in prison or kill me and you’ll never see me again.”

Later, in his adult life, after suffering theft, insults, and beatings at the hands of some of his low-class lovers in a public bathhouse in the quarter of al Ḥussein, Ḥātim would blame both of his parents for his homosexual instincts. He would remember “his father and mother with resentment and hatred. He would say to himself that if they had made a little time to look after him, he would never have sunk this low, but they were preoccupied with their

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52 Ibid., p. 75.
professional ambitions and had devoted themselves to achieving wealth and glory so they left him and his body to the servants to play around with."53 Ḥātim's incrimination of his parents, which occurs towards the end of the novel just before his death, anchors homosexuality back within the traditional, moralistic parameters of contemporary Arabic culture and vitiates all the positive representations of an intimate same-sex relationship portrayed in earlier sections.

As in Beirut’75, another problem in the representation of same-sex relationships in The Yacoubian Building, stems from the master/slave power dichotomy into which the narrative locks itself. While recalling his encounters with his first lover, Idrīs, Ḥātim comments that all of their lovemaking took place on the carpet in his room and not on his bed. Ḥātim attributes this to “Idris’s feelings of insignificance as a servant and his psychological inability to use his master’s bed even when having sexual intercourse with him.”54 As an adult homosexual, Ḥātim always looks to duplicate this feudal power dialectic by seeking lower-class partners whom he has to pay for their services, always searching for the characteristics of his first lover, Idrīs, down to his dark skin color. He finds all of these attributes and more in ʿAbduh, a poor Ṣaʿīdī soldier, whom he tempts with money and the promise of a better job if he agrees to be his lover. The seduction works for a while, and Ḥātim briefly enjoys, the bliss of a monogamous same-sex relationship that parallels any heterosexual relationship in terms of intimacy and caring. However, ʿAbduh’s conservative upbringing gets the upper hand and impels him to leave Ḥātim, particularly after the death of his infant son—an event which ʿAbduh views as God’s punishment for his “immoral” homosexuality. After ʿAbduh disappears, Ḥātim searches frantically for him, finds him, and convinces ʿAbduh to spend one last night with him. As is customary in their relationship, Ḥātim uses the lure of a fat check and the promise of a well-paying job if ʿAbduh accepts his offer. Pressured by the threat of unemployment and his immediate need for money, ʿAbduh relents, convincing himself that after this last night he will “close this dirty chapter in his life”55 and that a hajj/pilgrimage trip will eventually wash all of his sins away. The glaringly manipulative, classist aspect of this same-sex relationship becomes painfully obvious as they argue, when Ḥātim asks ʿAbduh, “Who exactly do you think you are?” ʿAbduh insists, “A human being, just like you.” Ḥātim answers haughtily, drawing on the classist, feudalistic rhetoric, “You’re just a barefoot, ignorant Ṣaʿīdi, I picked you up from the street, I cleaned you up, and I made you a human being.”56 Once more, as in

53 Ibid., p. 182.
54 Ibid., p. 76.
55 Ibid., p. 233.
56 Ibid., 236.
other examples of homosexuality in modern Arabic literature, the homosexual partner is denied his humanity, thus demeaning the homosexual representation and taking it into the realm of bestiality. Obviously, this sudden reduction to bestiality renders the moralistic and religious judgment of homosexuality all the more scathing. ‘Abduh’s reference to the ḥajj as a cleansing mechanism for the sinful homosexual allows the religious rhetoric to have the final word. Despite espousing a secular framework, *The Yacubian Building* posits homosexuality as a site of contestation between the impoverished lower classes and their new-found Islamist representatives (as in the case of the character Ṣaḥhā below), and the bourgeoisie, the nouveau-rich represented by the oppressive state power matrix. The use of the lower classes by the bourgeoisie is complete when Ḥātim, angered by ‘Abduh’s refusal to stay beyond the consummation of the sexual act, threatens to stop payment on ‘Abduh’s check and to withdraw his job offer. The slave/master rhetoric surfaces once more in Ḥātim’s language, putting an end to any egalitarian, romantic representation of homosexuality. Ḥātim shouts, “You’d strike your master, you dog of a servant? I swear by your mother’s life, no job, and no money!”57 Despite his progressive belief that “social injustice,” not homosexuality, is the reason for the country’s moral decline, Ḥātim is guilty of practicing the same social injustice on his sexual partners that his newspaper denounces.58

Homosexuality is further demonized, in this novel, when it is used as a tool for torture by the state’s representatives in order to extort forced admissions of guilt from political dissidents. Ṣaḥhā for example, is a poor, hard-working student and the son of the Yacubian building’s doorman, a young man whose aspiration to be admitted to the Police Academy, as his only chance of respectability and a decent life in capitalist, post colonial, modern-day Egypt, is crushed despite his impressive success on the entrance exam because of the perceived stigma of his father’s profession. As a result, Ṣaḥhā finds his desired social acceptance in the ranks of conservative religious groups and subsequently finds himself accused of being a member of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood political party. He is dragged to jail for further questioning, and when he refuses to admit belonging officially to any organized religious opposition, he is gang raped.59 In the context of authoritarian regimes, rape of

58 Ḥātim responds sternly to one reporter who suggests conducting an investigation of the increase in homosexuals holding leadership positions, in Egypt, suggesting that they are the cause of the country’s social and economic demise. Ḥātim convincingly argues that “Egypt has not fallen behind because of homosexuality but because of corruption, dictatorship, and social injustice.” See al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, p. 179.
political male prisoners, whether real or imagined, adds another dimension to the absolute domination of these regimes over their powerless subjects. In fact, a crude colloquial statement uttered by the majority of Arab citizens, especially males, is “the government is fucking us daily a hundred times over,” thus highlighting the utter sense of loss of the Arab male citizen, who feels emasculated by local and colonial political powers. The reenactment of the master/slave dynamic by the active male partner (the state and its representatives) and the passive male partner (the political prisoner) appropriates the homosexual act only in the context of domination and power, while simultaneously demonizing it for the community at large as a vile act associated only with torture, never with true intimacy. Not surprisingly, after this degrading act, Taha informs his Sheikh that “they violated [his] honor ten times... ten times,” and he resorts to active resistance, participating in a suicide bombing mission intended to destroy one of the generals who had conducted the investigation and authorized his rape. The Sheikh informs Taha that “the regime’s true objective in torturing Islamists isn’t just to hurt them physically. What they want is to destroy them psychologically so that they lose their capacity to struggle. If you surrender to melancholy, you will have realized the objectives of these unbelievers.” It is this subservience to “unbelievers,” local or foreign, that troubles the modern Arab citizen’s mind. Feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and poverty, combined with the reality of being ostracized from the political process, compound the Arab persona’s sense of desperation. The increase in the number of negative portrayals of homosexual characters is but a symptom demonstrating the Arab male’s loss of manhood and of self. This postulation is not meant to give a condemnatory, psychologically-based analysis of the Arab male, rather to uncover cultural and societal state of mind demonstrated in numerous modes of civilizational representations: fictional, theatrical, journalistic, and even virtual.

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60 Ibid., p. 169-170,
61 Ibid., 169.
63 For a superb theatrical representation of this emasculation crisis, see Sa’dallah Wannüs play, Tuqūs al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tahawwilāt (Beirut: Dār al-Adab, 1994).
64 Recent commentaries on an article entitled “al-Burūd al-Jīnī Bayna al-Azwāj . . . wa-Irṭifā Muʿādalāt al-Ṭalāq” (Impotence amongst Couples . . . and the Increase of Divorce Ratios) on the online daily magazine Syria-news.com, for example, give us a glimpse of the readers own reactions towards this topic. Responding to the magazine’s questionnaire about possible reasons for the referenced impotence, most answers cited economic, societal, and psychological reasons resulting from the dictatorial regimes of most Arab governments, Abū Shihāb, for example, cites the series of “worries caused by the state,” and the recent inflation rates that make “men as soft as a
Homosexuality and the Colonial Other:

Some contemporary Arabic fiction has approached the topic of homosexuality only within the context of the colonial other, either external (a Western partner) or internal (a partner from the rich Arab Gulf States). This treatment of homosexuality reenacts the traditional power dichotomy of the active colonial other and the passive Arab partner. Positing the issue within this colonial context incriminates the Arab State for emasculating its subjects, under the pretext of globalization, and for allowing them to be exploited in the most humiliating way possible. Yet in a certain sense the passive Arab partner, in these postcolonial narratives, cannot really be blamed for his homoerotic desire since he is seduced, forced to commit the act of *liwāt* under duress, coerced either by state pressure or his own abject poverty.

A case in point is Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm’s *Sharaf* (*Honor, 1997*),65 in which the main character, Sharaf, is enticed to visit the apartment of an Australian tourist, whom he later kills accidentally after the latter attempts to rape him. Sharaf is a typical twenty-three-year-old Egyptian youth living in Cairo in the post-*infitāḥ* (economic open door policy) capitalist/commercialist era, during which the noticeable influx of Western goods remains inaccessible to the average, impoverished Egyptian consumer. Nevertheless, the inability to purchase these expensive goods does not cancel the intrinsic human desire to acquire them, particularly among the propaganda-stricken youth, and therein lies the protagonist’s main dilemma. He is infatuated with the different brands of Western goods, from shoes and sunglasses to cars and fashion. The first time we encounter him, he is eyeing an expensive brand of new sneakers to replace his old torn ones. However, Ibrāhīm filters this vision through the reflection in the window of a covered, middle-aged woman standing behind Sharaf, introducing us at the same time to the conflicting traditional, national undercurrents that lie behind this postmodern, transnational façade. Ironically, in this global economy demonstrated by the influx of Western brands good, Egyptian citizens can only play the role of the consumers and the consumed, never the manufacturers or the creators of power. While window shopping, Sharaf ends up in front of a movie theater, where one of Arnold Schwartzzeneggers’ latest movies is being touted. Amid this exaggerated display of macho Western

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masculinity and economic superiority, Arabic masculinity, and indeed the entire country, seems emasculated by contrast. John, a blond Australian, enters this initially charged scene and offers Sharaf a free ticket to the movie, which the latter declines. However, “just like all the blond-haired foreigners in Egypt who are not used to rejections,” John insists, and Sharaf relents. After the movie, as they engage in chit chat about where they live, Sharaf lies about his downtrodden neighborhood, of course, and then he accepts John’s invitation to visit his luxurious apartment in the al-zamālik quarters. The opulence of John’s furniture and belongings reminds Sharaf of his extreme deprivation, and his sadness, enhanced by alcohol and hashish, forces him to break down and confess his abject poverty:

The confession began like a song by Umm Kulthūm—totally melodramatic:
I’m fed up with my life, I want to leave this country, I wish you could take me far away.

The khawāga (foreign national) remained silent, and simply put his golden chain around the young man’s neck, then laid his hand on his thigh and started fondling it.

When John’s advances turn into a rape attempt, Sharaf defends himself, kills John in the process, and ends up in jail. During the investigation, Sharaf’s emasculation is complete when he is stripped of his clothes and asked to choose a female name such as Sharīfa (the female version of Sharaf) for the investigators to use while addressing him. He survives another rape attempt while in jail, and all the while he remains confident of his impending “not guilty” verdict since, according to Egyptian law, his honor (sharaf) killing was justified. Yet he remains indefinitely in jail, while other men who engaged in similar honor crimes with native women are released. Since his victim was a Western national, the honor code never applied to him, proving yet again the inferiority of Arab masculinity in modern-day, globalized Egypt. At the end of the novel, Sharaf’s emasculation is complete when we see him shaving his body hair, with a razor made in Israel, while still in jail as a final acknowledgement of the status that he rejected all along in the novel—that of the penetrative passive partner, a transformation forced on him and other citizens like him by the authoritarian state. Indeed, if earlier metaphors of homosexuality in Arabic literature, Joseph Massad contends, “had it that colonialism

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67 Ibid., p. 19.
68 Ibid., pp. 535-536.
was rape, there was a slight shift now to new, yet related, metaphor of globalizations as sodomy/castration."

Some critics have faulted the “improbability” of the novel’s initial encounter, asking, “What twenty-year-old Egyptian would be innocent enough to misinterpret the khawaga’s invitation?” However, in light of Sharaf’s naïve infatuation with all things Western, his desire to escape from poverty, and John’s invitation couched in terms of friendship—“Come let me show you my house, you have to know it since we are friends now”—Sharaf’s behavior is quite believable. John’s reference to friendship taps into the homosocial aspect of Arab men’s interaction. Homosocial desire, as Eve Sedgwick and later Fedwa Malti-Douglas inform us, should not be confused with homosexual desire; it merely refers to a social relationship among members of the same gender. Evidence of homosociability in Arabic literature is almost always interpreted as a form of latent homosexuality by Western scholars, who are really projecting the West’s own homophobic obsession with homosexuality rather than remaining within the behavioral norms of Arabic culture. Indeed, the narrator of Sharaf takes pains to mention that Sharaf was “careful to leave the shared chair’s armrest to his friend so as to prevent their naked arms from ever touching each other.” It is obvious that he wants to absolve his protagonist from any homosexual tendencies, so as to highlight the extent of his victimization by the authoritarian Western superpowers and their surrogate: the Egyptian regime. The point is that homosexual depiction in this novel is seen as a violation perpetrated by external colonial powers and local government agencies intent on defiling the Arab citizen’s honor as well as that of the country, all in pursuit of neo-capitalism, integration in the new political world order, and economic globalism. In this process, we are reminded by Joseph Massad, “the crisis precipitated by globalization” becomes “a crisis of Arab masculinity.”

The modern Arab state’s betrayal of its citizens reaches its zenith in Jamāl al-Ghiṭānī’s short story “Hadḥā mā Jarā il-Shābb al-Ladhi Aṣbahā Funduqīyyan” (That Is What Happened to the Youth Who Became a Receptionist). There

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is immense disparity between the Egypt of 1956, the year of the protagonist’s birth at the height of the Arab nationalist euphoria during the regime of the late Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāssir, and present-day, impoverished Egypt with its “open door” policy. This disparity is reflected in the dreams that the protagonist had for “representing his country” as an ambassador and the job as a receptionist in a five-star hotel that he ends up accepting after finishing his studies in political science. Before long the youth discovers that his real job is to use his good looks in order to entice, and later service, important hotel residents. With great reluctance, he agrees to sleep with two foreign women. However, when a Saudi prince requests his companionship, he draws the line and resigns, only to find out later on that he has been wrongly accused of theft. This story highlights the extent to which the government will go to sell its citizens to the highest bidder. Faced with the young man’s refusal of his latest assignment, the director shouts at him, “Do you want to bankrupt the hotel? … If you will not do it for the hotel, do it for the country’s sake. Perhaps stirring his Excellency’s anger will ruin the countries’ mutual relationships.”76 The rest of al-Ghīțānī’s short story collection incriminates the State’s apathy toward the economic plight of its own citizens. Penury forces them to seek employment in the Gulf countries, where they and their families are used and violated in the worst possible way. In “Wa Fimā Yalī ma Jarā lil-al-H ḥalabī” (The Following Is What Happened to the Man from Aleppo), an Aleppan dessert maker is ruthlessly beheaded because he killed his Saudi sponsor after the latter had molested his eight-year-old son. But before his beheading the authorities insist on rendering his suffering all the more excruciating by summoning the boy and a “black cop[,] who raped the lad in front of his father. The painful screams generated from the homosexual act pierced the father’s ears”77 before he was put to death. Thus, the dispossession of the Arabic persona in present-day Arabic society is parallel to the loss of faith in the political system, and reaches its pinnacle in the Arabic novel of the ’90s.

If standing up to this hypocritical, despotic system does not produce positive outcomes, as evidenced in the last three stories, acquiescing to it often means losing one’s self in the all-consuming, colonial other. Portraying homosexuality in this manner absolves the Arab homosexual partner from any responsibility for his homoerotic tendencies and places the blame solely on the immoral colonial partner. The youth in the Moroccan novelist Mohamed Choukri’s Al-Khubz al-Ḥāfī (For Bread Alone, 1972)78 for example, blames both his poverty and an old Spaniard for tempting him to engage in a paid

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76 Ibid., p. 59. My translation.
homosexual encounter. The old Spaniard, described as a *maricón* (a passive homosexual) by the protagonist, encounters the homeless Moroccan youth and offers him a ride. In the car, the old man fondles the boy, exclaiming, “*¡Macho bravó!*” Then he proceeds to perform oral sex on him.

He began to lick it and touch his lips, and at the same time he tickled my crotch with his fingers. When he pulled half of it down his throat, I felt his teeth. And if he bites it? I thought. The idea cooled my enthusiasm. To bring it back, I began to imagine that I was deflowering Asiya in Tetuan. When I finished, he still had me in his mouth. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his lips. His face was congested, his eyes very wide, and mouth stayed open. I buttoned my fly and folded my arms over my chest as if nothing had happened. . . . Suddenly I was struck by my conscience. What I had done was no different from what any whore does in the brothel. My upright sex was worth fifty pesetas, looked at in that light.79

The encounter is deliberately described in revolting detail in order to distance both the protagonist and the reader from the homoerotic act. As with Sharaf’s sexual dreams in jail, in Ibrâhîm’s *Sharaf* where dreams intentionally centered around female partners, the sexual identity of Choukrî’s youth is fully grounded in heterosexuality. His fantasizing about sleeping with a woman as the homosexual encounter progresses is proof par excellence of his untouched masculinity. Indeed, the protagonist’s masculinity remains intact, since he manages to keep himself on the active side of the homosexual active/passive dichotomy, thus distancing himself even further from any homoerotic desires.

“Moroccan Slave,”80 a short story by Abdallah Taia, offers a final statement on the problematic colonial/local homosexual partnership. In it we see a reenactment of the master/slave dichotomy encountered earlier, verbalized here by a Moroccan protagonist who is the passive sexual partner of an American named Marlon. The couple lives in Paris, and the Moroccan partner, who unsurprisingly remains nameless, has so internalized his submissive role vis-à-vis his Western partner that he has no problem confessing, “He monopolizes me. I gave him control of my daily life . . . I am his boy, his love, He is my master . . . I am his slave in the name of love.”81

In the Arabic novel of the ’90s, to use Frédéric Lagrange’s words, “the Arab is now, even on the metaphorical level of sexuality, the victim of the Western

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81 Ibid., electronic document, no pages listed.
Phallus.”82 Metaphorically, the West enslaves the infantile East completely and does not have to disclose its hidden agenda, its “History.” Additionally, Marlon withholds the truth about his history from his Moroccan partner, yet demands that the latter divulges his. Curiously, this odd couple’s homosexual relationship only emasculates the Arab partner, not the American one who, faithful to the norms of exaggerated machismo, keeps his masculinity intact. The Moroccan partner confirms his lover’s superior masculinity when he states that Marlon “is not gay. He is in love with a boy. There is a difference, of course.”83 The shift in the representation of Arab homosexual characters from Mahfūz’s active, masculine Kirsha in 1948, to the feminized version of passive sodomites such as: al-Sammān’s Farah, al-Aswānī’s Ḥātim, Ibrāhīm’s Sharaf, and al-Ghītānī’s youth in the last decades of the twentieth century, ending with the utter emasculation of the character of ʿAlīa Mamdūh’s Sarmad, discussed below, in President George W. Bush’s post “Mission Accomplished” era; all indicate a demise in the perception of Arab masculinity parallel to the Arab individual’s experience on the political, economic, and cultural scenes.

Despite Marlon’s interest in learning more about his Arab lover’s culture by learning some Arabic, the parameters of the relationship are weighted so heavily in favor of the West that true understanding is impossible. It is ironic that they decide to start their first lesson in intercultural understanding on September 11, thus confirming that any homosexual encounter with the colonial other, consensual or other, is still rife with the dynamics of eroticized power, of the master/slave rhetoric, domination, mistrust, and, as such, possibly escape from the nexus of violence it generates.

Homosexuality and War

Among recent Arabic novels dealing with the topic of homosexuality, Hodā Barakāt’s Ḥajar al-Dāḥik (The Stone of Laughter, 1990) is one of the few that deal successfully with male homoerotic desire. Her tactic is simple but effective: let readers mainly sympathize with the protagonist Khalīl, so that they are vested in his success and saddened by his failure. Khalīl’s sexual difference is addressed immediately but subtly, without resorting to any explicit descriptions

82 See Frédéric Lagrange, “Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature” in Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East, p.189.
of his sexual activities: the narrator simply informs us that “Khalil’s legs were not long enough.”84 This disarming narrative technique leaves shock tactics behind and focuses on describing the origin of Khalil’s homoerotic sexual desire, locating it in his biological genetic make-up. This technique represents an important departure from previous treatments of homoerotic sexuality in the Arabic novel of the ‘90s, which located the essence of homosexuality in deviant social practices, poverty, local/colonial violations, and/or child abuse.

The fact that the novel is set against the background of the Lebanese civil war is significant because it highlights Khalil’s non-conformity with patriarchal definitions of masculinity dominated by aggression and violence. The female narrator, who empathizes with Khalil’s gender trouble to the very end, informs us that there are two forms of recognized masculinity in civil war Lebanon: that of the older men who make the administrative decisions to wage the war, and that of the younger youths who are lured, with promises of money and power, to perform them. Khalil, however, does not belong to either of these camps, for “the doors of both kinds of manhood were closed to Khalil and so he remained, alone in his narrow passing place, in a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life, just within reach of two very attractive versions of masculinity, the force that makes the volcano of life explode.”85 Khalil is at once perfectly happy with his androgynous state, and painfully aware of societal rejection of it. Whenever he ventures out to the warring streets, armed men look “scornfully at pale Khalil and his bag, which look[s] like a housewife’s shopping bag.”86 Khalil’s “inclination to peace” and “inability to stand the sight of blood”87 prompt him to separate his private life from the war-dominated public sphere outside, his little apartment, which he insists to the point of obsession on keeping tidy.88 He pretends that the war does not exist. His obsessive tidiness of his place stands in stark contrast to the outside mess, and scattered bodies generated by the war. He insists on following his “feminine self” deliberately ignoring all the questions raised about his ambiguous sexuality. He spends his days fantasizing about the expected visits of his lover, Nājī, and is peacefully oblivious to dominant males’ aversion to his obvious gender difference. However, after the loss of two of his lovers, a series of ideological brain washings by a war-driven fraternal order, and a violent attempt on his life, Khalil undergoes a transformation, after which he becomes fully vested in the masculine credo of domination. We witness his

84  Hoda Barakat, The Stone of Laughter, p. 3.
85  Ibid., p. 12.
86  Ibid., p. 33.
87  Ibid., p. 75.
88  Ibid., p. 23.
slow transformation as he joins the Lebanese warlords, becomes an arms dealer, develops broad, masculine shoulders and a moustache (the perfect tell-tale signs of his masculine masquerade), and starts hiding his eyes behind black sunglasses (often the look of the infamous mukhābarāt/secret service agents).

Before his induction into the masculine fraternal order, Khalīl had full autonomy over himself and his body. Though earlier chapters reference his dis-ease with his androgynous position, and with his often unrequited desire for his male lovers, for example he refers to himself as Yūssif’s “wife of the wrong sex”89 and Nājī’s “divorcee,”90 subsequent chapters celebrate the embracing of his androgynous self particularly after his close encounter with death during his ulcer operation. For the first time ever he starts loving his body stating “I love my beautiful body,” treating it with a reverence befitting the “beloved prodigal son.”91 After he learns the patriarchal language of violence, however, he loses his autonomy to his boss ironically named “Brother,” whose passive partner he becomes, and he loses his feminine voice and self in the process. Barakāt’s distinction between his lost feminine voice and the language of the Father that he has to be inducted into is very reminiscent of Jacques Lacan’s childhood individuation process as the child makes his/her entry into the symbolic order of the Father.92 She writes of Khalīl,

> From now on he will not speak in a voice but in a language . . . and he has to know in whose language.
> All my voice will be outside my language, my language will be peeled of my voice and it will be stripped, as I was stripped now and I will never, come snow or shine, be able to know the person I was and to remember him as he should be remembered.93

The militia’s attack on his defenseless body solidifies the fact that in this war-trodden, male-dominated society you cannot, and will not be allowed to occupy a neutral androgynous or political space. One has to pick sides and it is clear to Khalīl that in order to avoid being the victim, he has to be the aggressor. His final transformation into full-fledged masculinity comes at the price of deserting his long-held love and peace poetics, by embracing hatred as the only pure emotion capable of protecting him form the assault of others.

89 Ibid., p. 115.
90 Ibid., p. 24.
91 Ibid., p. 171.
93 Hoda Barakat, The Stone of Laughter, pp. 142-143.
Motivated by a motherly love and primal survival instinct, Khalil’s feminine self remarks “What choice, what choice? . . . It’s not enough . . . it’s not enough for you to love yourself Khalil . . . We know now that there is no choice: for you to love yourself means to hate others . . . Hatred, hatred. Hatred is my mother who loves me.”94 Before Khalil’s transformation, his feminine self, though passive and apathetic to the surrounding chaos around it, was capable of loving others (his lovers) and itself. After his transformation into forced pseudo masculinity, however, hate becomes his credo which he draws upon while performing the ultimate act of male sexual violence: rape.

In a surprising final scene, he ends up raping his upstairs neighbor; a single mother. This demonstration of masculine dominance sadly indicates his detachment from his old feminine self, the termination of the alternative space that he created for his sexual identity, and his embrace of the rhetoric of violence. The suppression of Khalil’s feminine, androgynous qualities, in his transformation proves most destructive to his true, different sexual identity. Nevertheless, just as the medieval alchemist’s “laughing/philosopher’s stone” acts as an agent that superficially changes iron ore into gold, Khalil’s integration into the masculine national rhetoric remains illusionary at best. The ensuing laughter is not that of happiness, but that of death and destruction. At the end, both the narrator and the reader are left questioning the validity of this newly constructed masculine identity and lamenting the lost fluidity of Khalil’s past androgynous self.95 The Stone of Laughter’s unique contribution to the ongoing homosexuality debate in modern Arabic literature is its suggestion that the difference in Khalil’s sexual identity stems from an innate biological difference,96 rather than behavioral or psychological constructs such as we have encountered in the previously discussed works. What Barakat clearly demonstrates, however, is the impossibility of espousing a neutral homosexual identity amidst the deep-rooted gendered polarity of violence and eroticized power dialectic. Indeed, what the epilogue informs us is that if such an identity ever exists, it will eventually have to “submit” to the status quo, to the performative aspect of masculinity, and to the “general misery of life.”97 For as long as the national construct allows itself to be dominated by the war’s essentialist rhetoric, there is no space left in the national discourse for an alternative homosexual identity.

94 Ibid., pp. 197-200.
95 Ibid., p. 209.
96 Ibid., pp. 11, 61-62, 75.
97 Ibid., p. 208.
Nascent Lesbianism

In contemporary Arabic literature there have been fewer representations of female homoeroticism than of the male counterpart. As with male homoeroticism, the reference to same-sex female love has involved only secondary characters, though with fewer details and less transparency. With the exception of Nihād Si‘rīs’ Ḥālat Shaghaf (A Case of Infatuation, 1998)98 and Ilhām Ma‘nṣūr’s Anā, Hiya, Anti (She, You, and I, 2000)99 whose main character, Sihām, is a lesbian in search of societal acceptance of her “different” sexual orientation, all the remaining examples of female homoeroticism stop at the depiction of occasional scenes, without any attempt to delve into the essence of sexual identity differentiation. These passing allusions are often riddled with heterosexual moralistic righteousness, which claims that female homoeroticism exists only as a prelude to, or as a temporary replacement of, normative heterosexuality. Thus the marginalization of women’s same-sex desire comes as a result of its representation, in medieval and modern Arabic texts alike, as a temporary alternative to heterosexuality or, at best, as a reaction against it. Lesbianism per se, at least up to the publication of Si‘rīs’s Ḥālat Shaghaf and Ma‘nṣūr’s Anā, Hiya, Anti has never been a character’s first choice in and of itself. Just as the Arabic title of Ḥānān al-Shaykh’s novel Misk al-Ghazāl (The Gazelle’s Musk, 1988)100 suggests (it is translated as Women of Sand and Myrrh), the prize always lies in male sexuality and in subscribing to the moral righteousness of heterosexuality, just as the precious musk is taken only from the male gazelle’s gland and not from the female deer. Female homosexuality, or female desire in general, often plays second fiddle to the dominance of male sexual desires, homosexual or other.

Take, for example, the relationship between the Saudi Nūr and the Leba- nese Suhā in Women of Sand and Myrrh. Female homoeroticism in this novel arises because of Nūr’s absentee husband as well as the boredom that she and

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Suhā experience in restrictive Saudi society. The initial encounter itself is described as an accident resulting from Suhā’s attempt to comfort a distraught Nūr, who has been banned from travel to Europe by her husband. Nūr’s husband had to confiscate her passport after hearing about her numerous sexual escapades in London. What is interesting, though, is less the encounter itself than Suhā’s resulting sense of guilt and disgust. Initially, Suhā is able to suspend her moralistic meter, and she allows her body to enjoy the experience. She reflects, “I didn’t think as I did in real life ‘A kiss is between a man and a woman’, but just wanted more. Every point in my body that Nūr reached she aroused and left in a state of agitation.” Yet despite the surprising pleasurable sensations that she experiences in their lovemaking, Suhā often describes a detachment from her body as if she were a different person afterwards: “Then I felt a sudden nausea, then disgust, and wished I could disappear through the cracks in the ceiling. . . . I wanted to separate from my body and give it orders: tell it to stand up and go away just as I wanted to do, open the door and chase it out.” Suhā’s return to her husband’s house and to what she imagines as the accusing eyes of her husband and son prompts her to engage in a ritualistic cleansing of her body in an attempt to claim it back as part of a socially-imposed heterosexual identity.

Suhā’s rejection of this newfound sexual identity is grounded in patriarchal, familial and, dare I say, colonial associations. In his analysis of the novel, Joseph Massad would argue that Suhā’s reaction is grounded in the fear of “going native,” and in the “assimilative” stance on the part of the seemingly more “civilized” Lebanese Suhā. Clearly this reading acknowledges the Western/civilized, Eastern/primitive dichotomies and their role in demonizing Arab homoeroticism at the turn of the twentieth century. To ground herself further in modern morality, Suhā firmly reminds herself of her family’s prestige and the parameters of her heterosexual identity: “I am Suha. I am twenty-five years old. My mother is Sitt Widad and my father is Dr. Adnan. I am not a lesbian like Sahar.”

The Arabic word she uses for lesbian here is “shādhdha” a term that denotes abnormality, deviation, and deficiency. It is distinctly different from suhāqiyyah, the neutral linguistic term often given to lesbians, which comes from the Arabic triliteral verbal root shq, meaning to rub, to pound, to crush, to pulverize, and to render something soft. While

102 Ibid., p. 50.
103 Joseph Massad, Desiring Arabs, p. 338.
104 Hanan al-Shaykh, Women of Sand and Myrrh, p. 52.
it is true that, in its strict linguistic sense, the term *sihāq* could be limiting to the proper portrayal of the wide range of lesbian love-making experience, which certainly involves more sophisticated emotional and sexual repertoire than just the act of “rubbing.” Still, at no point does the term *sihāq* (tribady) connote any of the moral deviation suggested by the modern word *shādhdha*, or project any of the Western Victorian moral values associated with the latter. Khaled El-Rouayheb asserts that the introduction of the term *al-shudhūdh al-jinsi* in the 1940s and 1950s reflects a “contemporary European concept of ‘sexual inversion.’” The use of the constituent term *jinsi* in the sense of “sexual” was itself a terminological innovation, reflecting the influence of the new European concept of “sexuality.”

In essence this term, *shādhdha*, defines the way female homoeroticism is depicted in this novel: as an abnormal deviation traceable to the lack or absence of a masculine love interest. In her attempt to escape Nūr’s obsessive pursuit, Suhā hides behind the religious admonition against homosexuality in general. For example in order to escape the prodding of Nūr’s nanny (referred to as Nūr’s mother), who tries to convince Suhā to continue her relationship with Nūr, Suhā tells the older woman, “What Nūr and I do together is forbidden. We have an illicit relationship.” Her use of the word *harām* (forbidden) incorrectly places female homoeroticism in the guilt-ridden realm of religious taboos. The mother’s answer, however, allows for exceptions to the religious rule, while framing lesbianism as a safe alternative to dysfunctional and/or absent heterosexuality: “That is wrong, my daughter. Wrong. But adultery with a man is worse. And you know what things are like between Nūr and her husband.”

This reference to the religious disapproval of homosexuality brings to mind Nawāl El Sa’dāwī’s lesbian female character Narguiss in *Jannāt wa-Iblīs* (*The Innocence of the Devil*, 1994). Unlike Nūr’s mother, who wants to bend the religious rule to accommodate lesbianism, Narguiss is intent on defying it altogether when she protests the asylum director’s claim that she will “go to Hellfire with Lot’s mother.” It is imperative to review their conversation to

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108 As I argue in the next section, lesbianism was not mentioned by name in the *Qurʾān*. Commentators and jurists often use the method of *qīyās* to equate it with male homosexuality.
see clearly Narguiss’s defiance and questioning of the accepted religious and societal status quo.

- Prepare the beer and the snacks. I’m coming to see you tonight.
- I’m leaving, leaving everything.
- Where are you going? To another man?
- I hate you. I hate all men.
- You love women now, eh?
- Yes.
- You’ll go to Hellfire with Lot’s mother.
- No, sir, I won’t.
- To be a lesbian is a sin, don’t you know that?
- No, sir, it is not mentioned in God’s book.
- You fallen woman. You whore.112

Narguiss’s reference to the Qur’ānic sūra that condemns male homosexuality but does not make any reference to female homosexuality is a true validation of her right to claim a lesbian identity that refuses to be defined by society’s imposed heterosexuality.

In fact female homosexuality is considered to be a sin only if one uses the qiyāṣ Islamic rule of jurisprudence (according to which one act is banned because another of a similar nature is). However, there is no direct reference to lesbianism in any Qur’ānic text. The sūra that is often interpreted as condemnation of lesbianism per se does not refer to the act directly but only discusses punishment for women who commit fāhīsha (sin), which in essence could refer to a host of other sins of a sexual nature, including zīnā (fornication) with a man.113 Verse fifteen of Sūrat al-Nisāʾ refers to the strict evidence needed in order to accuse women of committing fāhīsha: “If any of your women are guilty of lewdness, take the evidence of four witnesses from amongst you against them; and if they testify, confine them to houses until death do claim them, or Allah ordain for them some (other) way.”114 Sadly, Narguiss’s defiance does not advance the rights of lesbians; on the contrary, it leads to her immediate death.

Indeed, untimely death seems to be the natural denouement for homosexuals, men and women alike (one need only recall Ḥātim’s fate in The Yacoubian

112 Ibid., pp.172-73.
114 The Holy Qurʾān, ed. The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA (Medina: King Fahd Holy Quran, 1405 H.), Sūrat al-Nisāʾ 4:15.
Building), and it is often preferred to leading a life condemned to homosexuality, as Suhā clearly demonstrates in Women of Sand and Myrrh. After she is forced to sleep with Nūr one last time, Suhā's contempt for her lover and the homosexual act itself becomes so overriding that she decides to leave the country and return to Lebanon despite the dangers of the ongoing civil war. Similarly, Sihām's mother, in, Anā, Hiya, Anti, makes an identical decision when she decides to bring Sihām back from Paris to war-trodden Beirut so as to put an end to her developing lesbian relationship with Claire (her French female lover). In the final analysis, heterosexuality triumphs, and Suhā discards female homoeroticism along with the addresses of all the women she had met in her host Gulf country, signifying her, and the author's, utter rejection of it.

Another impediment to a true literary representation of Arab female homoeroticism is, in my estimation, the adherence to a politicized passive/active "femme/butch" formula that is clearly anchored in heterosexual and feminist politics rather than in lesbian body politics. In a groundbreaking article on Arabic lesbian identity, Imān al-Ghafarī correctly points out that "for the lesbian identity to exist, there is a need to free lesbianism of both the heterosexual assumptions and the feminist ones that politicize butch/femme lesbian relationships. In fact, the feminist discourse that turns lesbianism into a political choice is not liberating. Instead, it puts lesbians in a troublesome position where they have to play a major role in fulfilling the desires and fantasies of some heterosexual feminists at the expense of their true lesbian desires."115 Šunʿāllāḥ Ibrāhīm's Bayrūt... Bayrūt (Beirut...Beirut, 1988) is one of a number of works depicting a marginal lesbian relationship that adheres to the femme/butch dialectic and feminist politics but not to feminine body politics. Lamīā, who is the wife of an absentee publishing house director, is involved with Jamīla, an older woman clearly described, using "butch" terminology, as having "strong masculine hands" capable of delivering safety and comfort. Lamīā, on the other hand, is described by Jamīla herself as a "delicate creature in need of complete supervision and extreme tenderness."116 Just like a jealous male keen on protecting his territory, Jamīla warns the male narrator who becomes involved with Lamīā against continuing their heterosexual relationship. Puzzled by Lamīā's repeated attempts to be involved with other men, Jamīla exclaims, "I don't understand what happens at times. Say, [Lamīā's] need to prove her femininity or ability to attract men, or, perhaps, boredom."

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Laughing bitterly she adds, “or the generation gap.” At the narrator’s suggestion that Lamīā might not be a lesbian after all, but rather a bisexual “belong[ing] to both worlds,” Jamila answers, “Perhaps, but I remain hopeful that I will win her over to my world.”

The idea that lesbian identity is an acquired behavior rather than an innate one, as Jamila’s statement seems to suggest, undermines the validity of such an identity and locks it permanently within heterosexual parameters. Furthermore, it is clearly a step backwards from the medieval classification of al-Tīfāshī, who at least recognized the existence of a biologically-based form of lesbianism that is distinctly different and “unchangeable.”

Three promising works that engage in a true discussion of lesbian female desire and ground their arguments in its body politics, despite some minor residual trappings of heterosexual politics, are ‘Ālīa Mamdūh’s 2000 short story “Presence of the Absent Man,” the aforementioned Ḥālat Shaghaf, by Nihād Sīrīs, and Anā, Hiya, Anti, by Ilhām Mansūr. Mamdūh’s two female characters meet accidentally in the market place. From the outset of this impending relationship, female bodily desire takes center stage: “The two pairs of eyes were pierced by the light from a match that had just been struck, and the two bodies released a blaze of high tension, while between their fingers crept cold, damp sweat.”

The two characters remain nameless and are only referred to as “she.” The focus is on the beauty of the flourishing female body with breasts, shoulders, full hips, and taught thighs. In anticipation of their first intimate meeting, the first woman (a widower) plans the intricate details of the encounter. “She wants to begin from her toes. She will tickle them first, so as to see her smile. Maybe she will cry out with joy.” Their “sublime partnership” is described as “mere desires” capable of eliminating all fears and “taboos.” Still, the shadow of heterosexuality looms in the background as the second woman, pregnant though deserted and divorced, keeps comparing her former husband to her new lover. She reflects, “How close you are to me: your arm is like his, your muscles strong like his, your glances overflowing with this frenzied inferno.” Mamdūh brilliantly introduces the dilemma of a lesbian identity that has to reference heterosexuality when expressing its homoerotic

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117 Ibid., p. 250.
121 Ibid., p. 227.
122 Ibid., p. 227.
123 Ibid., p. 233.
desire. The problem that the story addresses, in my opinion, is the lack of any lesbian epistemology for the Arab lesbian to use as a point of departure. The right of feminine desire to express itself, and the right of the female body and its lesbian sexuality to exist fully without any reference to masculine heterosexuality, and without ever being complimentary to heterosexual desire is an integral right. Mamdūh’s story posits this right, legitimizes feminine body politics, and celebrates the female body’s intense desire, often in terms of “hunger and thirst.” However, this desire remains unquenched in the story since the widower’s jealous cat bursts in the window to put an end to the lesbian encounter before it even starts.

A significant novel of Arab female homoeroticism is Hālat Shagḥaf (A Case of Infatuation, 1998), by the Syrian writer Nihād Sīrīs, who excels at historical novels. In this work, Sīrīs uses his skills in the historical narrative genre to document a phenomenon that used to be prevalent among the pre-eminent female singers and the elite women of Aleppo in the 1930s. Banāt al-ʾIshra, as the female participants in this homoerotic love relationship were called, refers to the amorous involvement of the famous female wedding singers of the time with their young dancers and with the elite women of Aleppan society, in a practice very reminiscent of the medieval jāwārī singers. Stories abound of jealousy, the hunt for a new female lover, and the agony of trying to protect one’s lover from the romantic advances of other potential rivals, male and female alike. The fact that some of these women were married with children—though the preference was for a young maiden undefiled by heterosexuality—did not matter at all. Indeed gender segregation in Aleppo of the 1930s facilitated and fueled this kind of female homoerotic encounter. What is most remarkable about these involvements was the absolute infatuation of the lovers with each other, hence the title of the book, and the celebration of the state of ʿishq, in which sexual and spiritual intimacy go hand in hand. Furthermore, when free of the encumbrances of societally imposed heterosexuality such as husbands and children, the two female partners would enjoy living with each other under the same roof, thus fulfilling the lasting part of the term ʿishra, meaning the continuation of intimacy or companionship. The Banāt al-ʾIshra phenomenon is best described by one of the main characters and singers in the novel, Ablah Bahīra:

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When a woman loves, she dedicates herself to the beloved, without justifications, goals, or gains. Men love women out of selfishness, whereas a woman’s love is forever giving. A man takes and monopolizes the woman’s future only for his sake. He impregnates her to bring forth his own children, dedicates her life to serving him at home. So she cooks, cleans, and attends to his needs, but her own need is of no value to him. However, when a woman loves another woman the goal is love. Only love... no children. The two of them collaborate and serve each other. It is pure love... our love is not unlike that of the Sufis.126

The freedom to enjoy the female body without having to worry about pregnancy was referred to in the Arabo-Medieval context by al-Tīfāshī as one of the advantages of tribadism.127 Indeed, the novel follows the adab medieval genre in form and context. For example, the adopted narrative style is not unlike that of the famous One Thousand and One Nights, complete with the inclusion of two narrators: the main narrator (the writer) and the internal narrator (the old man recounting the story), thus generating the classic plot-within-a-plot narrative model. Nevertheless, despite its daring in discussing female homoerotic desire explicitly, Ḥālat Shaghaf is still guilty of displaying many of the medieval and archaic sentiments about the passive/active, femme/butch dichotomies, as well as of affirming the dominance of male heterosexual desire. For example, the main spokesperson for lesbian desire in the novel, Ablah Bahīra, the owner of the singing band, is often described in masculine terms. Although her sexual desire is clearly for feminine partners, her denial of her own femininity through repeated cross-dressing on stage enshrines masculinity as the ultimate goal of feminine desire. Perhaps the novel’s most disappointing pitfall is ascribing Ablah Bahīra’s masculine attributes to her parents’ treatment of her as a boy during her childhood. This, in turn, reaffirms the conservatives’ stance on homosexuality as a socially constructed identity rather than a biologically based one. Moreover, butch-like characters such as Ablah Bahīra are depicted as sexual predators who prey on young virgins and attempt to acculturate them in the homoerotic lifestyle, thus channeling their sexual desire from masculine to feminine partners. For example, when Bahīra plans to court the young Wīdād, the narrator comments that “she wants to possess her fully. She wants her as a creature who has never been defiled by men

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127 In numerating the advantages of lesbianism, al-Tīfāshī mentions that “women are attracted to it out of their fear of pregnancies and ugliness.” Also, in the same reference a man is told, “Your wife engages in lesbianism.” He replies, “If by doing this she absolves me from her pregnancy, let her do what she wants.” See Shihāb al-Dīn al-Tīfāshī, Nuzhat al-Albāb fīmā lā Yūjad fī Kitāb, ed. Jamāl Jumʿa (London and Cyprus: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1992), p. 242. My translation.
before, not even in her fancy.”128 The final statement of the novel is the fleeting temporality of this acquired lesbian desire, since it will always lose when the heterosexual alternative presents itself. In the final analysis, Ḥālat Shaghaf reinforces the old medieval adage that lesbianism is but a passing phase—one that will disappear at the onset of heterosexuality.129

Ilḥām Manṣūr’s Anā, Hiya, Anti is perhaps the only contemporary novel in Arabic literature that addresses female homoeroticism from a biological difference standpoint. In her attempt to answer the questions “Why am I rejected so? Why cannot I be like the other women who fall in love with young men and live a normal life? Why do I have to live my life in the closet? Why didn’t God create a normal woman out of me?”130 Sihām undertakes a journey of self-discovery aimed at bringing herself and the people around her, such as her mother, to accept her lesbian identity. In the process, the Arabic contemporary reader is introduced for the first time to a discussion of the reasons behind female homoeroticism, to the lack of academic and societal attention to the subject, and finally to a new way of thinking about, expressing and experiencing same-sex relationships in Arabic culture.

From these new modes of presenting same-sex female desire, there arises the need for a new discourse in the Arabic language that would recognize this lifestyle and that acknowledges male or female homosexual identity without resorting to judgmental pronouncements. For example, the newly coined term al-mithlīyyah (gay lifestyle or homosexuality), which parallels al-ghayrīyyah (heterosexuality),131 is used on numerous occasions in Anā, Hiya, Anti as a


129 In the chapter on “Adab al-Suhq wa al-Musāhīqāt,” al-Tīfāshī recounts the story of a man who is told that his wife is a lesbian, he answers, “I ordered her to do it.” When asked why? He explains, “because it is softer on her labia, purer for the opening of her vulva, and more worthy when the penis approaches her that she know its superiority.” See Shihāb al-Dīn al-Tīfāshī, Nuzhat al-Albāb fīmā la Yūjad fī Kitāb , p. 242. For a detailed discussion of this and other similar incidents, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Tribadism/Lesbianism and the Sexualized Body in Medieval Arabo-Islamic Narratives” in Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages, pp. 123-141. The idea that lesbianism is accepted culturally only when it is complimentary to heterosexuality, but not when it excludes the latter, is further expressed in Ḥālat Shaghaf when the narrator mentions that husbands tolerate their wives’ lesbian tendencies as long as it does not affect the latter’s heterosexual desire for them. Divorce ensues and the wife is called shādhdha / abnormal only when she refuses to perform her conjugal duties with her husband. See Nihād Sīrīs, Ḥālat Shaghaf , p. 56-57.


131 On the difficulty of getting the politically correct word al-mithlīyyah to replace the more charged word of al-shudhūdh al-jins (sexual deviation), see Frédéric Lagrange, “Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature” in Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East, p. 170; also see how al-mithlīyyah is still culturally refused by the Arabic
perfectly acceptable way of referring to this new lifestyle. Since it is closer to the scientific/psychological realm, in which the novel dabbles, al-mithliyyah is posited as a term that reflects homosexuality without any residual religious and/or cultural biases. Sihâm’s description of the motives behind her lesbian desire is entrenched in feminine body discourse and seems to match the idea of two bodies seeking fusion via their “similar” qualities, or “mithil,” so as to intensify the celebration of femininity and the female body. Let us listen to her reasons behind her attraction to same-sex relationships: “My love philosophy is to love yourself in the person most similar to you, and to love the identical other as if s/he is from you, to you, and a true image of you. This way there are no fears, no projections, no gender wars that announce the winning party. In this reality, winnings are shared, and giving is complete, without confrontations between the strong and the weak, males and females.”

From the standpoint of narrative structure, the novel is lacking on various levels. The narrative periodically loses momentum, since the protagonist, Sihâm, often seeks to educate the reader by interweaving contrived, intellectual letters meant to defend lesbians’ right to carve out a recognized cultural identity. In addition, this identity remains suspect, because she admits to her pseudo-therapist, a female professor with whom she later falls in love, that her hatred of men is perhaps due to her father’s attempts to rape her during her childhood. The plot is also scattered, reflecting the chaos of the Lebanese civil war whose violent atmosphere dominates the background. Moreover, there is a tendency to generalize all forms of female intimacy, such as the everyday female homosociability so common in the Arab Middle East, as precursors of female lesbian encounters. Perhaps that is the reason why some critics denigrated the literary value of the work and considered it as the product of a “volatile ‘modernist’” whose aim is to shock the “unsuspecting audience with explicit avowals of (unprecedented?) opinions,” that “reflect neither historical realities nor even personal feelings.” While the criticism of the literary value of the work might be warranted, that of its relevance to the social and personal realities of the hundreds of Arab homosexuals who remain in the closet is not. Indeed, the novel correctly points out the level of discomfort associated press from an article entitled “The Last Catastrophe for Arabs in the Twentieth Century” al-Majallah, (29 October 1999).

133 See, for example, Youssef Rakha, “Mission Impossible” al-Ahrām Weekly, 496 (24-30 August 2000).
134 The lack of an organized gay rights movement comparable to those we encounter in the West is not an indication of their non-existence; rather it highlights the prevalence of cultural and religious factors that insist on denying their right to exist. For a rather journalistic expose of
with discussing the topic of homosexuality in the Arab world. However, it states that coverage of male homosexuality, while minimal, does at least exist. Female homosexuality, however, is wrapped in the male’s fear of admitting that he “cannot please the woman.” It becomes necessary, Sihām argues, for a female writer to bring the topic of female homosexuality to the forefront. The topic of homosexuality, she asserts, “is forbidden in the case of the female; a woman’s body is filled with taboos, totems, and ʿawras. So how could we add yet another ʿawra to her many ʿawras?” The importance of Anā, Hiya, Anti lies in the fact that it has carved out linguistic and personal space for the expression of lesbian desire and the emergence of a recognized, outspoken lesbian identity.

The examples of modern Arab literature discussed thus far display a new way of interrogating the position of the Arab self vis-à-vis the new political and economic world order. There is a stark shift from the more fluid, inclusive medieval same-sex representations to the more rigid, exclusive, one-dimensional postmodern ones. In contrast to the medieval tradition which exhibited an awareness of the possible biological causes of same-sex practices, albeit in a pathological light at times, modern representations shy away from representing the biological aspects, and locate the reason behind homosexual practices in psychological or behavioral motives instead. In modern Arabic fiction, the homoerotic epistemology is more limited as the concept of desire loses its multiplicity, efficacy, and its focus seems to be more on violent action than erotic desire. In postmodern fictions, homoeroticism is posited as the degenerative, immoral face of the colonial project, and the failure of the postcolonial nationalistic revolutions. It seems that even when the topic of male homosexuality is approached in contemporary texts, it is treated through marginal characters or displayed as a byproduct of colonial and/or local state domination of the unsuspecting, impoverished Arab individual, and as therefore worthy of annihilation through the death of the homosexual character. As for female homosexuality, it fares slightly better in terms of the marginality of the characters involved, but it still suffers from its mistaken depiction as a precursor or a temporary alternative to normative heterosexuality. The problem, as I see it, lies in the defeated Arab male persona, who has continuously witnessed

the contemporary lives of gays in the Middle East see, for example, Brian Whitaker, Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East, (London: Saqi Books, 2006).

135 The term ʿawra in religious and linguistic texts refers to something shameful, imperfect, the genitals, and something that should be covered. For a detailed discussion of this term see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing, pp. 121-127.

defeat in economic and political arenas from the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, to the loss of Palestine, to the Gulf Wars of the ’90s, and more recently the American colonization of Iraq. This new sense of inferiority is far different from the position of superiority enjoyed by the Arabic/Islamic persona during the heyday of the medieval Islamic Golden Age and the spread of its vast empire. During the medieval period, *adab* texts dealing with homosexual eroticism flourished as part of the *adab al-zurāfa* (entertainment literature). Sadly, in most of the Arab countries today there is no such cultural space for entertainment and laughter: the Arabic citizen has to reconcile his/her sense of self with the disappointments of lost wars, lost lands, and, in most Arabic countries, lost civil freedoms. Indeed, Massad concurs that this “move from the comic to the melodramatic in representing matters sexual, and especially matters homosexual, marks perhaps a decrease in sexual sophistication and a puritanizing of sex, not to mention the infiltration of Western taxonomies and medical diagnostics.”137 The answer to our initial question regarding the reason behind the increase of gay representations in modern Arabic Literature seems to be the demoralized modern Arab persona; particularly that of the Arab male, defeated by colonial and local powers and plagued by a diminished self-image.

This tragic sense of utter demoralization, and the recurrent trope of emasculation reaches its pinnacle in Ālīa Mamdūh’s recent novel, *al-Tashabbi* (*Yearning*, 2007).138 Herein the confluence between sexual and national dysfunction shifts this metaphor from the symbolic to the literal realm. The protagonist, Sarmad, an Iraqi translator living in Paris, suddenly discovers the disappearance of his male sex. The correlation between the loss of his manhood and that of his country to the colonizing American forces is all too obvious. Sarmad’s Moroccan lover, al-Baydhawīyah, tells him, “Sarmad, I understand your male sex more than you do. Your city is being pounded, bombarded, and here you are incapable of pounding me with something as soft as a rose.”139 Stuck in exile at the crossroads between two cultures and two languages, Sarmad loses control of his male prowess, just as he lost Iraq, his homeland, to the Americans, along with his ability to be part of the political process in his country. Not surprisingly, we encounter another oppressive example of homosexuality, in this novel—one associated with the violent rape of the authoritative state to its citizens. Mohannad, Sarmad’s brother who works in the secret service corp of Şaddām’s Iraq, repetitively violates Yūssif (a

139 Ibid., p. 156. My translation.
Kurdish friend of Sarmad’s). The homosexual act is described in terms of shame, defilement, and pain all mixed with images of the blood following every rape scene. Al-Safir journalist Sabāḥ Zwaīn correctly points out that in this novel “the narrator wanted to focus on a prototype of the Arab man—the one that discovered, at the end of the journey, that he lost his homeland while loitering in exile. He lost his intellectual battles, as he was fighting Don Quixotean windmills, while the rest of the world had already beaten him in other wars. As a result, he also lost his sex and masculinity.” In the postcolonial, globalized world, occupied nations and individuals can only be represented in terms of sexual passivity. Therefore, the only role that Arab masculinity could play is that of the feminized passivity, that of maḫūlun bihi (the passive homosexual). Indeed, after the loss of his country, Sarmad seems to have lost his ability to translate, to move harmoniously between the English language of the colonizer, and the Arabic language of the colonized. “There is a curse befalling my country” he reflects “The curse reaches Babylon and all the languages; a curse befalling the name, the letter, the action, and the acted-upon, (maḫūlun bihi) the isolated, terrorized city, the river that we can no longer bath in, and the effeminized Tigers.” In this final narrative of dispossession, the loss of masculinity is not only restricted to the Iraqi protagonist, but also to his Arabic language, and even the river Tigers as well. It is no wonder, then, that the last safe haven untouched by external colonization and despotic Arab regimes is the cultural realm in which conservative religious taboos reign supreme. For that particular reason, modern novelists approach the subject of homosexuality sheepishly and raise the issues of alternative sexual identity only to demonize them later as extensions of Western and authoritarian governmental domination.

Moreover, female homosexuality presents another threat to the demoralized male Arab identity, for admitting its existence points out the fact that the Arab male is a failure not only as an active participant in state and world affairs, but also as a respected husband who is capable of satisfying his female partner. On yet another level, legitimizing the discussion of lesbian identity undermines the nucleus of the Arab family, of which the mother is a central figure, and thus eliminates the ultimate haven of safety left for the Arab persona. For

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140 Ibid., 139.
142 ʿĀli Mamduḥ, Al-Tashahh, p. 266.
143 It is worth mentioning that the French and British colonial powers in the Arab world, while changing the constitutions of the countries under their mandate, often left untouched the civil law dealing with familial issues such as marriage and divorce. Likewise, modern authoritarian
these reasons, recent literary engagements with the topic of same-sex relationships in contemporary Arabic literature have accomplished little in terms of advancing the cause of gay rights in the Arab world. While it is true that historically most cultures misrepresented homosexuality, early British and American cultures are but a few, none has, at least to my knowledge, so deeply assimilated the sense of dispossession and national failure in the homosexual persona as much as the Arabic culture has. One wonders whether we would have encountered the same negative portrayals if homosexuality was free from the trappings of political, economic, and national dislocation. Similar to the challenges of Arab feminism when its proponents discovered, after the initial euphoria of personal liberation projects has dissipated, that they cannot have the luxury to fight only personal battles, but national ones as well, the Arab gay movement has to negotiate its alternative sexual identity along the same lines with national causes. Though the previously discussed examples have only scratched the surface, luckily they opened up avenues of discussion on what used to be a taboo subject. Still much more awareness of the political, cultural, and biological issues at play in understanding sexual difference is needed before the hundreds of Arab gay individuals seeking societal recognition of a full-fledged alternative, same-sex identity can truly come out of the closet.

governments usually do not interfere in private familial issues as long as their political monopoly over their citizens is intact. Thus, through all the upheaval witnessed by the Arab world in recent modern and postmodern history, the family nucleus, where the man reigns supreme, remained intact. The family is truly the last and only castle left for the Arab male individual to exercise his superiority.