

Desiring Arabs

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The book, called *Forbidden Love* in its Australian edition and *Honor Lost* in its U.S. edition, was revealed to be a sham only after it sold hundreds of thousands of copies around the world. Its author turned out to be an Arab American who never lived in Jordan who moved to Australia.¹⁶³ This is not to say that “honor crimes” do not occur, but rather that when they do occur (which, as indicated in the introduction, is a much more infrequent phenomenon than fatal crimes of passion in the West) they have much less to do with sexual puritanism and more so with a crisis of masculinity, as a number of the works to be discussed below will clarify.

Deviants in Power

In addition to memoirs and autobiographical writings, novels that included themes relating to sex of all kinds proliferated. In her first novel *Bayrut '75* (Beirut '75), published in 1975,¹⁶⁴ Syrian feminist novelist Ghadah al-Samman explored the transformation of two dreamy-eyed Syrians, one an aspiring writer called Yasminah, the other an aspiring singer called Farah. The two Syrians headed to Beirut to launch their careers. Yasminah became the mistress of the son of a Lebanese politician who would later discard her when an arranged marriage to the daughter of his father's rival was planned. Dejected, Yasminah sought out her brother, who knew of her affair but showed no disapproval as long as his sister gave him money. When she returned empty-handed, he beat her and then killed her to avenge his “honor.” Farah was more successful in attaining his career goals only after he struck up a Faustian deal with Nishan, a distant family relation, now a powerful entertainment producer and public relations man in Beirut.¹⁶⁵ Nishan's sexual life was the topic of jokes in Lebanese high society, “as the frigidity of his wife, the daughter of an expatriate millionaire, led him to declare that he preferred sleeping with boys.”¹⁶⁶

The Faustian deal that Farah transacted with Nishan was spelled out in detail. One day while sunbathing, as per Nishan's orders (who was an onhand PR person), Nishan began to rub some lotion on Farah's back in such a way that Farah “understood.” He explained that “in bed I was

drunk and amazed simultaneously. While the whole thing was not pleasurable, it was not as bothersome as I had imagined it. For wealth, fame, and glory, and the accoutrements of the easy and free life, everything is permitted.” As Nishan explained his lack of attraction to women and how much he enjoyed men, Farah “felt that he was trying to justify. I felt some tenderness toward him, but something inside me was breaking, breaking. I felt as if I no longer had possession of myself. I had sold it forever, to the devil!”¹⁶⁷ Farah had been launched by Nishan as the “singer of manliness” on account of his rugged good looks, as he had “the body of a stud with thick chest hair showing through his shirt opening, and such a husky peasant voice with no trace of affectation or deviance that the young women of Beirut fell in the trap. This young man began to excite in them all the possible hunger for an epoch of strong men . . . For in Beirut, Nishan said, there was a hunger for ‘manly men.’”¹⁶⁸

After his sexual encounter with Nishan, Farah was unable to have sex with women at all. He tried with a different woman every night but to no avail. When the last one closed the door on her way out, “he felt that the door between him and the world of women had been shut forever.”¹⁶⁹ Unable to deal with the loss of his manhood that Nishan usurped, Farah began to drink and take prescription drugs nonstop and began to suffer from a nervous breakdown. His situation kept deteriorating to Nishan's horror, especially when Farah began to dress in women's clothing. He ultimately lost his fame and left Beirut.

For Ghadah al-Samman, the Lebanese ruling class was literally a bunch of fuckers penetrating dreamy-eyed youth, destroying them in the process. If active male homosexuality in al-Samman's novel resulted from female frigidity and wealthy decadence, and passive male homosexuality from ambition and greed, this was because manly masculinity was nothing less than a masquerade, just as femininity had always been.¹⁷⁰ Al-Samman's depiction is one wherein passive homosexual experiences not only render men impotent but also impel them to dress the part, wearing women's clothing and publicly declaring their womanly, and therefore unmanly, essence. As for those who continued to pose as manly men, her novel sought to remove the veil from them (Nishan, the early Farah, Yasminah's brother, as well as other male characters) in order to expose their unmanliness. Indeed, the attempt by Nishan

163. Malcolm Knox, “Her Life as a Fake, Bestsellers' Lies Exposed,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 2004. See also David Fickling, “Bestseller on Honour Killing ‘Is a Fake,’” *Guardian*, 26 July 2004.

164. Ghadah al-Samman, *Bayrut '75* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1975). For the English edition, see Ghada Samman, *Beirut '75*, translated by Nancy N. Roberts (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995).

165. The deal is actually named a “Faustian” one in the novel. See *ibid.*, 44–45.

166. *Ibid.*, 52.

167. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

168. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

169. *Ibid.*

170. See Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.

to recreate the “epoch of manly men” was doomed to failure precisely because he lived in a world where castration dominated.

Egyptian novelist Jamal al-Ghitani would see the ruling class differently, mainly as desirous of being penetrated, not of penetrating. In this, he expands on *The Malatili Bathhouse’s* representation of Ra’uf. His novel *Waqā’i’ Harat al-Za’farani* (The Events of Za’farani Street), published in 1976, would register impotence, which is presented as tantamount to castration, as the prevailing condition in the Arab world of the 1970s. His novel expressed the despair of intellectuals of the Nasirist generation who had believed in building socialism only to be faced with the reality of repression and the national security state.¹⁷¹ The symbolic image that al-Ghitani used to express the usurpation of the power of citizens in that context was male impotence. His novel, written in a mélange of stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and police reports, is reminiscent of Mahfouz’s *Zuqaq al-Midaq* in locating unfolding events in a street filled with myriad characters. If for Mahfouz, the street or the alley represented the other of the modern nation being formed by the colonial encounter, for al-Ghitani it represents the modern nation tout court.

The male residents of Za’farani Street are suddenly overcome with a case of incurable impotence, which turns out to be the result of a talisman conjured up by the Za’farani Street living saint, Shaykh ‘Atiyyah, who begins to issue orders about when street residents should go to sleep, when they should wake up, what they should eat, that eating would be collective, that marriages and families must be dissolved in the interest of “freedom of choice,” etc. Shaykh ‘Atiyyah wanted to bring about equality and peace in a world lacking in both. Male impotence begins to spread everywhere inside the country and internationally. “Za’faranism,” as the new philosophy of the Shaykh comes to be known, spreads to Paris, Buenos Aires, India, and many fictional countries around the globe. The Soviets issued denunciations of this new superstition in *Pravda*, asserting that equality and justice can only follow a natural progression sketched by Marx and cannot be altered by superstitions. Other countries closed down the borders and their airports in an attempt to control the spread of the impotence epidemic, but to no avail.

As background to the new epidemic, the novel tells of the emotional and sexual histories of most of the residents, men and women, as well as of the international economy of marriage and sex that prevailed. The

171. Jamal al-Ghitani, *Waqā’i’ Harat al-Za’farani* [The Events of Za’farani Street] (1976; Baghdad, Dar al-Shu’un al-Thaqafiyah al-‘Amah, 1987). For the English edition, see Gamal Ghitany, *Incidents in Za’farani Alley*, translated by Peter O’Daniel, with an introduction by M. Enani (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1986).

author in this sense is clear that the preimpotence period was not characterized by bliss, as we are told of the depredation of poverty, which forced families to marry their daughters off to rich foreigners, including in one case an elderly Libyan and in another a rich man “from one of the black countries.” While the Libyan and his children from a previous marriage oppressed the young Egyptian wife until she fled back to her country, the rich black African “admired his beautiful white wife so much that one night his admiration increased to such a degree that he ate her.”¹⁷² Umm Suhayr, a Za’farani resident, commented that “this is the punishment of mothers who sell their daughters off.”¹⁷³ Other foreigners, especially Gulf Arabs, would visit the country seeking prostitutes, including Ikram, one of the street residents. In reality, many of these developments would come after the Nasirist period, in the 1970s and after, and did not occur in the 1940s, as the novel implies. But if capitalism led to the sale of Egyptian women to the highest foreign bidders, including African cannibals (itself a measure of the humiliation of poverty experienced by Egyptians) whose conjuring in such imaginings is informed by the racist trope that represents Black Africans as primitives, the native ruling class engaged in even more shocking practices, which al-Ghitani’s novel exposes.

Such exposition occurs in the context of the sexual history of ‘Uways, an Upper Egyptian peasant-turn-migrant worker who walks north to Cairo looking for work. After being fired from his first job as the Za’farani Street baker for sexually harassing a female customer, he was offered a position at a bathhouse where he would “become clean, eat meat on a daily basis, and live rent-free on condition that he spend the entire night at the bathhouse. He will receive a monthly salary, like government employees, and what he will perform is simple and pleasurable,” consisting mainly of bugging a number of high-profile bathhouse customers on a nightly basis.¹⁷⁴ The customers “occupy high positions in society and control the destinies of many people. Some are famous and appear on television and are interviewed on radio, which renders their visits to the bathhouse top-secret.” ‘Uways agreed immediately. His first assignment involved a gentleman with “a light complexion and smooth skin, who did not utter a single word except for some harmonious moanings.” ‘Uways became the favorite of a high-ranking newspaper man who requested of the bathhouse owner that he only pleasure him and no one else. The owner as-

172. Al-Ghitani, *Waqā’i’ Harat al-Za’farani*, 122.

173. Ibid.

174. Ibid., 39.

sured him that that would be the case, when in reality ‘Uways was being called upon to perform his services seven times a night.¹⁷⁵ When alone with the “respectable gentlemen,” ‘Uways “would sleep with them and show them much respect, and when one of them asked him to beat him up and call him names, he did so as he would executing an order.”¹⁷⁶

Ghitani’s novel is clearly inspired by *The Malatili Bathhouse* on a number of counts. Aside from the bathhouse setting and the class-age representation of same-sex practice, Ghitani has ‘Uways, mutatis mutandis, play the role of Ahmad. It is interesting how for al-Ghitani, like for Waliy al-Din, powerful men in society and the media—though dominant and oppressive in every other way—seek to be dominated and buggered by the most disempowered members of the underclass. Society, it would seem, is being ruled not by penetrators but by penetrates. This theme is carried through to a number of female characters who for the most part seem to oppress their husbands, especially after the husbands became impotent. Al-Ghitani’s use of sex appears more allegorical than representative in this novel, wherein these descriptions do not only or entirely describe actual practices as much as function as symbolic of wider political trends—homosexuality here is a metaphor more than anything else, standing in for other abominations and unnamable forces of anarchy infiltrating the social body and transforming the order of things.

When ‘Uways was later approached by a Za‘farani Street woman, whom he had desired but who failed to arouse him, he was alarmed. He had not yet found out that Shaykh ‘Atiyyah’s talismanic curse was behind his condition. He wondered: “Does his work prevent him from sleeping with women? He was scared. Would his life be turned upside down after a while and he will become like his customers?”¹⁷⁷ The next day, ‘Uways realized that he could not even get aroused with his male customers, which led to his dismissal from his job. When he went to the Shaykh seeking help for his condition, he started by explaining, the narrator tells us, that “in the last few days, he has been overcome by a symptom . . . which equates him with women.”¹⁷⁸

‘Uways did seem to have at least one customer from Za‘farani Street who did not belong to the ruling class, a “young man called Samir who was the most debauched of all the men he slept with and the one who made the most [feminine] moves and uttered the most moans.”¹⁷⁹ Samir, the younger of two brothers, appeared to everyone to be a polite and

obedient teenage boy. His father, a low-ranking government employee, was a dreamy, traditional man who had grandiose plans for both his sons. Samir was on the honor roll and was, according to his father’s plan, slated to become an engineer. When one day it came to the father’s attention that Samir was not performing his daily prayers, he beat him and demanded an explanation. Samir claimed that “sometimes his clothes are . . .” and did not finish his sentence out of embarrassment. The father understood that the son must have been experiencing wet dreams, “but refused his excuse insisting that he bathe often. The next day, he went to Shaykh ‘Atiyyah and asked him to make a talisman for his son Samir, as he thought that the evil eye must have struck him.”¹⁸⁰ When Samir’s father heard that Samir had been seen in another neighborhood with a

disreputable person named Mahdi, Samir cried for a long time and swore that he never met anyone by that name. The next day, his father bought two sets of underwear of different sizes . . . the shorter ones for Samir and the longer ones for Hassan. A week later he went to the kitchen, turned on the lights, and began to search through the dirty laundry in the hamper. He turned Samir’s underwear over, exposed it to the light, and saw dry yellow smudges on it. He went to bed relieved and certain of his son’s manliness.¹⁸¹

Samir, it would seem, had other sexual partners besides ‘Uways and Mahdi. When Shaykh ‘Atiyyah called for a meeting of street residents to announce his new regulations, Samir was terrified: “Maybe he [Shaykh ‘Atiyyah] will tell his father about his relations with ‘Atwah the falafel vendor and with Mabruk, the student at Al-Azhar University. Also ‘Uways’s presence there frightened him. He saw him once at the bathhouse. He limited himself that day to going into the bathtub. Does he remember him? He is careful not to look him in the eye.”¹⁸² Ultimately, appalled by the new regulations that Shaykh ‘Atiyyah imposed and that his father wanted to enforce, especially regarding sleep and wake-up time, Samir challenged his father, disobeying him. The father beat him. Samir then fled the family home, never to be heard from again. The father, already showing signs of paranoia, lost his mind completely following his son’s flight and began to hallucinate that he was a leader in the midst of battle and that his own son Samir had joined the enemy ranks against him. It would seem that on account of his desire to be penetrated, Samir

175. *Ibid.*, 40–41.176. *Ibid.*, 92.177. *Ibid.*, 40.178. *Ibid.*, 34.179. *Ibid.*, 41.180. *Ibid.*, 46.181. *Ibid.*, 49–50.182. *Ibid.*, 66.

did not belong among the working classes but rather among the ruling classes whom his father imagined him to have joined. In fact, it appears that the desire to be penetrated on the part of the upper classes was now trickling down to other classes.

Samir's literal flight from the scene was not incidental. Indeed, in accordance with Shaykh 'Atiyyah's new regulations, street residents were instructed no longer to use greetings such as "good morning" and the like but substitute for all of them the expression "This is the time to flee" (*hadha zaman al-farar*). Several street residents besides Samir also fled, including the pimp Takrali and his wife Ikram, whose secret lives of prostitution were broadcast by the Shaykh. Faridah, wife of Abu Fijlah who fell in love with her daughter's private tutor, also fled and took her daughter along.

It is interesting that al-Ghitani does not explore female homosexuality in his novel. While most of the women of Za'farani Street were full of passion and desires for men, which could no longer be fulfilled, none of them thought of having sex with other women. This is important, as the talismanic curse would render any man they would approach sexually beyond Za'farani Street impotent as well. As the Shaykh sought equality among all humans, and given 'Uways's description of his condition as one which had rendered him "equal to women," it would seem that lesbian sex among all humans would be the most equitable form of sex among equals. Yet, surprisingly, that was not an option open to the characters. In fact, all desirous women in the novel either abandoned their husbands in the hope of finding men outside the perimeter of the street who would not be struck by the curse or lost all respect for them in those cases where they stayed with them. They thus fulfilled one of the maxims often used by Samir's father, that "the longer you stay with a woman, the less she should be trusted."

While one female character was allowed to masturbate,¹⁸³ no other sex seemed possible in a postmanly world. If men could penetrate men and women and some of the men could be penetrated by other men in the era when men existed, in a postmanly world full of women and their equals, no interhuman sex seemed possible at all, despite the persistence of women's desires for men and the persistence of men's desires for women *and* men. What is normative in a manly world remains normative in a postmanly world. It is nonphallic sex, not "deviant" sex, that is unimaginable by al-Ghitani's dystopic vision. Nonsex, for him, therefore is preferable to lesbian sex, which remains unthought. Al-Ghitani's

183. *Ibid.*, 258–59.

point however is that the Nasirist system brought about equality among the citizenry through the castration of men. What is most interesting in this conceptualization is that as soon as the citizenry becomes equal, social and biological reproduction ceases. Here, the nonreproductive forms of sex that the ruling class and prostitutes engaged in become more generalized as nonsex. In this social context of sex as recreational and nonprocreative, equality leads to depopulation and decline, themes borrowed from post-French Revolution conservative English thinkers. We will see how the vision of Egypt as a country inhabited by biologically sexed women and by former men now socially sexed as women would occupy the thoughts of a number of Egyptian novelists for the next three decades. In this sense, following Fanon's views of colonialism and sexuality, the decolonizing nation inherits the colonial representative strategy of reading colonized men as castrated, while displacing the other colonial fantasy of the native man as hypervirilized on the internal native as local other, in this case, Upper Egyptian men. This is not to say that some Arab novelists did not address how the colonized man could liberate his country through sexual conquest of European women. Al-Tayyib Salih's classic novel, *The Season of Migration to the North* (*Mawsim al-Hijrah ila al-Shamal*) presented its main protagonist, the Sudanese Mustafa Sa'id, as such a man, as Sa'id was said to have declared, "I will liberate Africa with my . . . [*sic*]."¹⁸⁴

But if Nasirism eliminated men from Egypt and at present consisted of a ruling class that enjoyed being mounted by poor peasant and working-class men, Yusuf Idris's novella *Abu al-Rijal* (*The Manliest of Men*, literally "The Father of Men") offered a different, albeit related, allegory. Published in 1987, a decade after Ghitani's novel and towards the end of Idris's life, the novella was most explicit in its sexual symbolism.¹⁸⁵ An allegory about President Nasir, to whom it alludes but never explicitly names, the novella is a cruel denouncement, not of Nasirism as such, but of Nasir himself. If the Nasirist experiment had rendered all Egyptian men "equal to women" in Ghitani's novel, for Yusuf Idris, it exposed Nasir himself as a "pseudoman" whose status everyone knew but could not say due to their "hypocritical manners." Sultan (which means "the one with authority"), the protagonist, who saw himself and was seen as "the manliest of men," was in reality a "pseudoman" who desired to

184. Al-Tayyib Salih, *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila al-Shamal*, 122.

185. Yusuf Idris, *Abu al-Rijal* [*The Manliest of Men*] was published as part of his collection of short stories *Al-'Atab 'ala al-Nazar* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram lil-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1987), 69–99. The English translation appeared in a bilingual edition. See Youssef Idris, *A Leader of Men*, translated by Saad Elkhadem (Fredericton: York Press, 1988).

be mounted by manly men. The story opens and closes with the fifty-one-year-old Sultan—the approximate age at which Nasir (1918–70) died—a macho gangster who is married and has grown children, reflecting on his life and what led him recently to desire being mounted by other men, when he had been the manliest of men for much of his life. He looks at his reflection in the mirror, feeling alienated and overcome with an existential crisis, beginning to notice that he was losing the hair on his body, remembering how hair had functioned as his initiation into manhood when he was a fourteen-year-old boy, at which time the fair fluff on his body was transforming into coarse black hair.¹⁸⁶ Sultan realized that he desired one of his gangsters, whom he had christened “Bull.” While Bull sits silently next to Sultan as Sultan revisits his entire life, in the final scene, Sultan acts out on his desire for Bull.

That evening, after noticing his disappearing hair and his aging body, Sultan called for Bull to join him on the balcony of his home. He did not speak to him, although he would look at him and size him up and fall back into deep thought. Bull was scared, not knowing what had befallen his boss. Sultan himself did not know what he wanted from him. The narrator recounts how Sultan was considering “the idea that he should surrender before that young man who is terrified of him, of his manliness and authority. One of the thoughts that occurred to him was that Bull was imagining the exact opposite situation, that he was trembling out of fear that Sultan would ask of him what the stronger asks of the weaker; for the requests of Sultan are sacred commands whose execution is inevitable and from which one cannot escape.”¹⁸⁷ When he considered seeing a psychiatrist, he wondered what he would say. He refused the idea that he would have to “confess to the beginnings of strange desires, that take the form of attacks, initially infrequent, but later more frequent and closer to one another, so much so that his life and thoughts could revolve around nothing else.”¹⁸⁸ As we revisit his earlier life, the narrator tells us that

When it came to the playfulness of boys, or precisely that phase in their age when boys invariably must touch one another, some responding with the pleasure of being the passive ones, while others with the pleasure of being the active ones, or both together, Sultan was extremely sensitive, refusing to submit. Indeed, he was so sensitive, and his desire to reach early manhood quickly was so strong that he would not let anyone touch him, and consequently, he would categorically refuse to touch

anybody else. He was a little man, who inherited his pride from his father, or rather he was proceeding with emulating his father or being like him—that father, whom he considered the manliest of all men, with the greatest stature. Indeed, he never felt and it never occurred to him that his father was a poor man. For those of his age, there were no rich and poor, there were only manly men, men who were halfmen, or those who were not men at all. The only difference among people was the difference between manly men and those men who were pseudomen.¹⁸⁹

Sultan, who hailed from a poor rural family, was a smart and diligent student who attended university and was an activist seeking to help in the transformation of society. He joined the Arab Socialist Union, the only legal political party during the second decade of Nasir’s rule. He was a double major in history and economics and studied at night and worked as a construction worker in the daytime and still managed to excel at his studies.

He was the pride of the university, and later all universities [in the country], a pride for his generation and the generations that followed. Indeed he was one of the prides of Egypt and its leap that had taken it from being an occupied country in an old and ugly world into a country that is a leader of liberation, and champion of peoples, exploder of revolts and of revolutions, until Sultan became a veritable sultan . . . He was the first youth leader with whom the Leader President had met, shook his hands, and who was granted a medal, and acquired status, the leader of a new school and direction, surrounded and accompanied by a small army of followers from among geniuses and admirers, and those who follow the followers.¹⁹⁰

He neither sought “money or political ambition” but rather sought “justice” for the “oppressed.” For him “a man is not such due to the thickness of his moustache and the intensity of his tyranny but rather the man is a man because he is chivalrous and generous, and courageous,” and “the woman is a woman not on account of her femininity and her coquetry, but by her greater role, that she be the greatest mother for a more evolved humanity. Motherhood like manliness is not an adjective or a description; the two are rather values, high degrees of emotional and rational human conduct, even corporeal conduct. This is what makes humans unique and thanks to their guidance a human being reached the epitome of evolution rendering him the most paramount living thing in existence.”¹⁹¹

186. Idris, *Abu al-Rijal*, 71–72.

187. *Ibid.*, 83.

188. *Ibid.*, 77.

189. *Ibid.*, 79.

190. *Ibid.*, 84.

191. *Ibid.*, 85.

Sultan suspected that his mother might be the reason and the cause for the emergence of his sudden desires. Yet his "Upper Egyptian" mother never spoiled him nor was she harsh with him. She was unlike his friend's mother who always questioned her son's manhood whenever he came home late, accusing him, on account of his fair skin and blondish hair, that he was late "because he must have been with the other boys in the corn fields."¹⁹²

It never happened that his [friend's] mother's prophesy came true, that he would become like that when he grew up, just like Shahin al-Tahhan. This Shahin al-Tahhan was one of the many phenomena that some rural villages specialize in, whether in Lower or Upper Egypt. He was a man in appearance and figure, with beard and moustache shaven; this aside, he was feminine in everything else, in the way he spoke, the way he walked, his attachment to womenfolk in the village, and even in his work. He used to sell butter, ghee, and cream and would seduce the young teenage boys of the village with the amount of money he would pay. He used to have an agent among the young loafers who would bring them to him in exchange for money. He was famous and well known to people in the village. He was deplored by many prudish and religious folks, but for normal people, and due to his long history and the fame of his habits, he was seen as one of those normal phenomena that were not condemned, but became an object of ridicule to some and used as an example by mothers to warn their sons of the consequences if they acted softly, or if they grew their hair long, or wore their skullcaps in a crooked way on their heads.¹⁹³

His mother was not one of those, however, as she never impugned his masculinity. In fact, when she caught him mounting his uncle's she-donkey in the stable, she turned back quickly and said while walking away: "How could you ride your uncle's she-donkey without a saddle, you ass?"¹⁹⁴ Indeed, even when she caught him having sex with an older widow and beat him as punishment, he felt that she beat him because that was what she had to do, but that she was in fact "proud" of him.¹⁹⁵

A decisive day came when he was called upon by a man to rescue him. Here, the analogy to Nasir and the plight of the Palestinian people is strongest. It was a plea to provide succor, "the call for succor that one knows will be heeded by the right man he had sought out," for that man was known for his "chivalry." Hundreds and thousands of Sultan's supporters came to help, but none of them could make the decision, as they

all waited for him to make it.¹⁹⁶ Against all expectations, his deep and manly voice came out this time like the voice of a "hermaphrodite." He said: "I am of the opinion that we should let it pass this once and submit. We will later choose the time and place of the confrontation,' even though, everyone knew, and he, most of all, that this, this exact noon hour . . . is the most appropriate time, and mobilization for it at the moment would be the strongest mobilization. The only meaning for delay is not only missing an opportunity or postponing the battle, but also, and in all frankness, fear, retreat, and flight."¹⁹⁷ In this passage, Idris is clearly making reference to Nasir's refusal to open a battlefield with Israel, cautioning against letting the enemy decide the time of battle, until finally Israel attacked him in 1967.

Even rivals were in disbelief that Sultan retreated from the call of duty. "When the moment of truth and decision came challenging him in the heart of his home . . . he fled."¹⁹⁸ When Sultan later tried to explore within himself why he did what he did, he concluded that "he was not that powerful man around whom they drew a halo, nor that brave man that made souls tremble. It is this outside that makes him appear such, while on the inside, it was hollow all the time, empty, just a child who liked the way his father looked and liked his manliness and courage and went about emulating them."¹⁹⁹

Things got worse. When Sultan retreated to his village, still acting as the strong courageous man that he was no longer, even though people pretended that he was, he demanded respect from everyone. Here the village is symbolic of Egypt, while the country stands in for the Arab world more generally. When Sultan ran into a young village peasant, Ahmad, reading a book and working the land, and the man did not greet him (the reference here is to the student movement that erupted in demonstrations in 1968 and was repressed by Nasir), he had him beaten up. Ahmad apologized upon being told who Sultan was. But that was not enough. When Sultan found out that this Ahmad's uncle was none other than Shahin al-Tahhan, he started to ridicule him and to ask him if he had done it with his uncle as the other boys had.²⁰⁰ While Ahmad

196. *Ibid.*, 89.

197. *Ibid.*, 90.

198. *Ibid.*, 90.

199. *Ibid.*, 91.

200. An interesting short story in this regard was written by Egyptian writer Alifah Rif'at. Titled "Badriyyah and her husband" [Badriyyah wa Zawjuha], the story tells of Badriyyah's husband who refuses to have sex with her after his release from prison. 'Umar was a waiter in the neighborhood café and was popular and respected in the neighborhood, even though it turned out that everyone knew (except his wife) that he liked to be buggered by men so much so that "had he been a woman

192. *Ibid.*, 87.

193. *Ibid.*, 87.

194. *Ibid.*, 88.

195. *Ibid.*

initially did not respond to Sultan's taunts, Sultan tried to humiliate him publicly. The young man had had enough. He jumped Sultan, knocked him to the ground and put a sickle to his neck demanding that Sultan declare in front of the whole village, "I am a woman." No one could interfere to help him, as Ahmad was serious about killing him. Sultan chose life and uttered the declaration, to the horror of all the men. Sultan left the village after that day and became a gangster, surrounding himself with younger gangsters.

Having recollected his thoughts, with Bull still in the room full of anticipation and terror, Sultan finally made his move and had Bull mount him. "Everything ended. His sticky sweat was redolent with the smell of broken pride, torn-up dignity, and a degradation that he enjoyed and savored—smells that can only provoke nausea when combined together, but they never made him nauseous."²⁰¹ Rumors spread that he had become another Shahin al-Tahhan, who by then had died ("it is said that his nephew Ahmad had lured him to the dam and drowned him"²⁰²). Still he did not care, and no one dared tell him to his face that they knew. He proceeded to lead the gang, and all the gangsters, including Bull, remained around him, and "he remained the lion."²⁰³

For Idris, Nasir's defeat and refusal to initiate the battle with Israel for over a decade, his retreat from the Arab world to Egypt after 1967, and his repression of the student movement in 1968, insisting that he was still the leader, even though everyone saw him defeated, were all manifestations of an essential feminine cowardice whose truth lies in

he would have gotten pregnant by now." The interesting bit in this short story is that unlike al-Tahhan in Idris's story, 'Umar did not seem to suffer any social shame on account of his desires and sexual practices. What seems unexplainable in Rif'at's short story, however, is that although 'Umar liked getting buggered by men before he went to jail for theft, he still managed to have sex with his wife. No clear explanation is offered as to why he stopped having sex with his wife after his release from prison. The only possible explanation offered in the story is that after he came out of jail, it seemed that "jail time intensified his calamity." See Alifah Rif'at, *Fi Layl al-Shita' al-Tawil* [During the Long Night of Winter] (Cairo: Matba'at al-'Asimah, 1985), 53. I should note that this story was published first in English translation before it came out in Arabic leading to skepticism among some that it might have been written first in English. For the English edition, see Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Short Stories*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1983). The translator makes no mention that the translated stories had not been published in Arabic yet.

201. Idris, *Abu al-Rijal*, 98.

202. *Ibid.* There are many other novels and short stories in this period that feature characters that would engage in same sex contact with little moralizing. A notable example is Thani al-Suwaydi, a writer from the United Arab Emirates, who wrote a sensitive novella about a protagonist who narrates his story to a "mute friend" in a mixture of hallucinatory fantasy and reality, depicting his "feminine" desires to dress and sing like women and to be penetrated by men in *Al-Dizil* (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1994).

203. *Ibid.*, 99.

the body and its desires. It was not that Sultan had been a real manly man all along and then became a pseudoman, rather the opposite. Idris is a committed essentialist here, demonstrating that Sultan had always masqueraded as a man, when in reality he was never one. Indeed, when he finally declared that he was "a woman," he did so "as if he were breathing a sigh of relief."²⁰⁴ It was after his inability to confront the enemy when called upon to do so, after he, out of cowardice, chose life as a woman, rather than death as a manly man that Sultan's desires fully exploded to the surface, insistent that they be satisfied, that Bull mount him and that he enjoy being mounted.

Rewriting the Nasirist experience in such terms in 1987, seventeen years after its demise, was not incidental. The figure of the passive deviant had become used consistently since the 1970s as a symbol of political and national defeat, in addition to its literal reference as a defeat of manhood itself. This is to be contrasted with earlier sexual allegories that dealt literally with castration rather than passive "deviance." Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's classic novella *Rijal fi al-Shams* (Men in the Sun), published in 1963, had posited Abu al-Khayzaran, a character that stands in for Palestinian and Arab leaders, as literally castrated by a Zionist bomb during the 1948 war.²⁰⁵ His impotence is what leads to the death of the three Palestinian refugees attempting to smuggle themselves into British-occupied Kuwait in search of work. The transformation of novelistic allegories from castration to impotence and to passive male homosexuality is significant. Indeed, locating desire in the body, which must be transformed in accordance with the nature of its desire, will be picked up by a number of novelists and playwrights in the 1990s. For Idris, the feminine catamite represented by Shahin al-Tahhan was indeed a normal feature of life, which should not be condemned. What was abnormal was that the manliest of men should be one. In such a context, we find out, like in al-Ghitani's novel, that there are no longer manly men, and that indeed the world is now divided between "pseudomen" and "those who were not men at all." As for Shahin al-Tahhan, he was killed on account of Sultan's coming out as a catamite while insisting on remaining "the manliest of men." If Nasirism rendered all Egyptian men into women, Idris revealed that it had also rendered Nasir himself into

204. *Ibid.*, 96.

205. Ghassan Kanafani, *Rijal fi al-Shams*, in Ghassan Kanafani, *Al-Athar al-Kamilah, Al-Riwayah* [Collected Works, Novels] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Abhath al-'Arabiyyah, 1972), 29–152. For the English edition, see Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun, and Other Palestinian Stories*, translated by Hilary Kilpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978).

one. Abu al-Khayzaran's castration in Kanafani's novella resulted from colonial bombs, but Nasir's fictional passive deviance was the result of his own cowardice. Herein lies the centrality of Sultan's declaration that he *was* a "woman" to his *transformation* into one.

The novels of the 1940s and 1950s illustrated the impact of colonial modernization on existing sexual desires and practices (Mahfouz), or marshaled them in the service of transforming the desires and practices of ancient figures (Khuri). In contrast, the 1960s ushered in a new approach that depicted the distortion of desires and sex when it is deployed by the modern state machine of torture (Y. Idris and Ibrahim) or by new Western bourgeois feminism (S. Idris). The 1970s seemed to link male homosexuality to the local conditions of poverty and to European men during the colonial period (Shukri), or to poverty and bourgeois decadence in the postcolonial period (al-Samman). It is beginning in the 1970s that homosexuality begins to be deployed as political allegory that feminizes the ruling classes (Waliy al-Din and al-Ghitani) or the political leadership itself (Y. Idris), and where male homosexuality is depicted as a form of irreversible degeneration (Farah, Sultan, Ra'uf, and everyone in al-Ghitani's novel).



SIX



The Truth of Fictional Desires

Except for Yusuf Idris's *The Manliest of Men*, written at the cusp of political and social changes, all the novels and short stories we surveyed in the last chapter were written before the rise of Islamism and the Gay International. The relationship between masculinity and colonialism and their link to civilization make up a part of the allegorical representations in these novels, but the problem of degeneration was still not fully explicit in them, at least not in terms of focus on deviance as the most prominent feature of the epoch. Indeed, by the mid-1980s, "degeneration" in fictional writings had not yet partaken consciously of a Western epistemology and taxonomy of desires. Soon, however, this would change. The themes of civilization and primitivism, of liberal individual rights, and of degeneration as a racial, sexual, and territorial concept would become evident in a number of works of fiction. Sexual desire and "deviant" practices would become the organizing principle, nay, the axis, around which these questions are negotiated. This would coincide with the rise of the Gay International and the Islamist movement (AIDS remained absent from fiction entirely), as well as the advent of globalization.

In this chapter, I will discuss four major literary productions that exemplify this major turn, beginning with Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Deer's Musk* (1988), and Sa'dallah Wannus's very popular play *The Rites of Signs and Transformations* (1994), and then moving to Sun'allah Ibrahim's novel *Honor* (1997), and ending with 'Ala' Al-Aswani's much celebrated