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To cite this article: Bishara, Z. (2019). Lesbianism as Another Alternative for the Other: A Punishment or an Escape? The Saudi Novel "*al-Akharun/The Others*" as a Sample. *Al Raida*, 43(1), DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v43i1.1747

To link to this article: 10.32380/alrj.v43i1.1747

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Article type: Article

Article accepted: 10<sup>th</sup> August 2019

Published online: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Publisher: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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## Lesbianism as Another Alternative for the Other: A Punishment or an Escape? The Saudi Novel "*al-Akharun/The Others*" as a Sample

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### Abstract

World Literature has witnessed the appearance of many novels that focus on the physical experiences of the "body" and deal with sexual themes. In their historical context, these novels represent a protest against the social moral values and search for alternatives. Among these novels are Lady Chatterley's Lover, Anna Karenina, and Madame Bovary. In Arabic literature, the Egyptian writer Ihsan Abd al-Qudous laid the foundation for this type of novel.

Literature has developed through breaking the barrier of taboos and adopting different forms. One of the controversial issues, whose red lines literature has crossed, is the issue of sex, which exists in every human relationship between males and females. The Arabic novel has addressed sexual taboos and dealt with them as an adventure still in its initial stages despite numerous significant contributions that have appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Recently, Saudi Arabian women writers have broken various taboos and dealt with the problems that they confront as women in the Kingdom by employing the themes of sex, the body, and other taboo issues. Some critics accused these writers of trying to draw attention to themselves by exploiting these subjects to increase their readership. In fact, these novelists have exposed new phenomena in conservative Saudi society and broken the stereotypical image of conservative Saudi women. This study deals with Saba al-Herz' novel *al-Akharun/The Others* as a sample of these novels.

**Keywords:** Sex, lesbianism, homosexuality, Sihaq, Saudi women, al-Akharun

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## Introduction

*Sihaq* is a phenomenon that preceded the people of the Prophet Lot, and we read in the inherited literary works, the material objects, and the social values of the peoples of the region information that confirms that certain societies that knew culture and started history knew about homosexuality and showed that it was not strange to them nor considered an abnormal social behavior. Those works and material objects bear witness that homosexuality was widespread and accompanied by social values, literary works, events, and mythological drama of which history provides evidence.

The Qur'an, as a representative of Islam, deals with homosexuality in the following verse:

" وَلَوْطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ أَتَأْتُونَ الْفَاحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُمْ بِهَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ. إِن كُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّنْ دُونِ النِّسَاءِ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ مُّسْرِفُونَ." (We also (sent) Lot: He said to his people: "Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? "For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds.)<sup>1</sup>

This verse was intended for Lot's people, whose story was mentioned with different details in three texts of Abraham's religion. Nonetheless, homosexuality did not become a phenomenon until Lot's people in Sodom and Gomorrah in Jordan accepted it. The term *liwat* in Arabic means "homosexuality" and it is derived from the name "Lot." The term *liwat* in modern Arabic still means "sexual intercourse" between two males.<sup>2</sup>

That ancient Egyptian society accepted homosexuality as a culture is reflected in several testimonies, some of which are mythical as we see in the story of the conflict between Horus, the god of the sun, goodness, and justice, and Set, the god of darkness, chaos, desert, storms, and foreigners.

We also have testimonies in materials or witnesses in cemeteries, papyri, and monuments that belong to different ages. *Al-Sihaq* was known among ancient Egyptian women but evidence of that is infrequent, if not rare. Some archeologists give weight to the argument that there are scenes that show some women that embrace each other and play with female signs and symbols.

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1 The Holy Koran. Surat al-A'raf, Verses 80–81.

2 For more information about *Liwat* (homosexuality) and the story of Satan's temptation to Lot's people, see: Ben Ibrahim Ahmad al-Hamad (1994). *Al-Fahisha Inda Qawm Lot/Lewdness among Lot's People*. 1st ed. Al-Riyadh: Dar Ibn Khuzayma, p. 86.

Moreover, there are intimate scenes between women in the area of “Tel Amarna.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is not easy to distinguish in this art between faces where male and female features are combined simultaneously.

Nist Neb Tashiro (970 B.C.) says in one of the versions of the *Book of the Dead*: “I have never had sexual intercourse with any woman in the Temple.” This sentence implies that by denying that she had sexual intercourse with any woman in the Temple, Nist is indicating that female homosexuality was known and probably accepted by society outside of the Temple. Besides, the text does not refer to the prohibition of homosexuality or contempt for it; it only proscribes practicing sexual intercourse “in the Temple,” which was an arena for some popular celebrations of “fertility” that witnessed erotic activities among men and women, especially among the Temple Mistresses.

*Sihaq* was also mentioned in the *Book of Dreams* from the late ages and based on Carlsberg Papyrus 13, which mentions an admonition and gentle reproof of a certain woman by another because she “dreamt that she had sex with another married woman.” Several sources, including the statements of the Egyptologist Cassia Spakoska indicate that the text “condemned conjugal infidelity but did not condemn the act of lesbianism in general, which implies the probability that *Sihaq* was accepted to some extent in the Egyptian society.”<sup>4</sup>

*Sihaq* among the Arabs was described by Abu al-Qassem Hussein bin Muhammad al-Ragheb al-Assfahani, who said that the first who practiced lesbianism were the women of Lot’s people when they noticed that their men were having sexual relations with males and deserting females. When the females had strong sexual desire, they started rubbing their thighs against each other and found pleasure in that. Then they rubbed their buttocks and felt more pleasure. Then

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<sup>3</sup> Al-‘Amārnah is an extensive Egyptian archaeological site that represents the remains of the capital city newly established (1346 BC) and built by the Pharaoh Akhenaten of the late Eighteenth Dynasty, and abandoned shortly after his death (1332 BC). The area is located on the east bank of the Nile River in the modern Egyptian province of Minya.

The name for the city employed by the ancient Egyptians is written as Akhetaten or Akhetaton. Akhetaten means “Horizon of the Aten.”

The name Amarna comes from the Beni Amran tribe that lived in the region and founded several settlements. The ancient Egyptian name was Akhetaten.

The city was built as the new capital of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, dedicated to his new religion of worship to the Aten. Construction started in or around Year 5 of his reign (1346 BC) and was probably completed by Year 9 (1341 BC), although it became the capital city two years earlier. To speed up construction of the city most of the buildings were constructed out of mud-brick, and whitewashed. For more information, see: [www.britanica.com](http://www.britanica.com); [www.amarnaproject.com](http://www.amarnaproject.com); Lucas, R. & Harris, J.R. (2011). *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (reprint of 4th edition (1962), revised from first (1926) ed.). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Carolyn Graves (2000). *Dancing for Hathor Women in Ancient Egypt*. U.K: Continuum Books, 2010. p. 66; Redford, Donald B. (2001). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt, Vol.1*; Article about “Erotica in Ancient Egypt” By Lise Manniche, Oxford, p. 78; Shaw, Ian & Nicolson, Paul (2002). *The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 45.

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they rubbed the anus with the anus; the clitoris clashes with the clitoris and the vulva ('Al-Hun'<sup>5</sup> الهُنْ in Arabic) with the vulva and the water flowed from them,<sup>6</sup> and when God destroyed the men and women of Lot's people, there was no more liwat (homosexuality and lesbianism).

The first Arab woman who practiced *Sihag* was Ruqasha bint al-Hassan al-Yamaniya, who fell in love with Hind bint Amer bin Sa'sa'a, the wife of al-Nu'man Ibn al-Mundher Ibn Imru' al-Qays, who was nicknamed Abu Qabous, King of Hira. One day, Ruqasha bint al-Hassan al-Yamaniya came to visit Hind. Hind welcomed her in her palace. Hind was extremely beautiful and fresh and Ruqasha was attracted by her. al-Nu'man used to make raids and, as a result, he was absent from his wife for a long time. Thus, Hind and Ruqasha slept together on his bed. They fell in love with each other so strongly that they felt like husband and wife.

During the Umayyad Caliphate, the desire for sexual intercourse increased and *Sihag* became widespread in the city. It is said that the news about the spread of lesbianism reached Hubai al-Madiniya, who was a lustful woman who lived during the rule of Marwan Ibn al-Hakam.

Hubbai taught the women of the city the "art of love" and therefore, they called her "Hawa'/Eve." She approached the women of the city and said: "I was told that you developed something called 'Sihag' by which you do away with men." They replied: "This is not our intention, but it is better than pregnancy, which causes a scandal." During the Abbasid period, which is called "The Age of Sex" by some researchers in the history of sexuality among the Arabs, some people called for "sexual intercourse" between men (*liwat*). Similarly, a new group of women called for *Sihag*. In fact, an intense battle took place between "sexual intercourse" and "*Sihag*." Some women began by referring to "sexual intercourse" but soon moved to *Sihag*. Others left *Sihag* and moved to "sexual intercourse."<sup>7</sup>

There is no book about sex that does not refer to *Sihag*. For example, the book *Nuzhat al-Ashab fi Mu'asharat al-Ahbab* by al-Samaw'al bin Yahya bin 'Abbas al-Maghrebi, devoted Chapter Six to the reasons why some people divert sex from its natural course. He also dealt with the

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<sup>5</sup>Al-Hun' (الهُنْ in Arabic) is one of the Six Nouns (in Arabic grammar). The term is used to refer to the woman's sexual organ (farj /vagina). For more information, see: al-Mu'jam al-Wasit (2011). 5th ed. Cairo: Maktabat al-Shuruq al-Dawliyya, p. 1040.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Assfahani, al-Hussein bin Muhammad (2006). *Muhadherat al-'Udaba' wa Muhawar al-Shu'ara' wa al-Bulagha'*. Beirut: Dar Sader, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup>Al-Assfahani, al-Hussein bin Muhammad (2006). *Muhadherat al-'Udaba' wa Muhawar al-Shu'ara' wa al-Bulagha'*. Beirut: Dar Sader, p. 111.

reason why some intelligent and wise people prefer the “youth” to the “female salve,” and the reason why some women prefer *Suhq*.<sup>8</sup>

The book of *Nuzhat al-Albab fi ma la Yujad fi Kitab* by Ahmda bi Yusuf al-Tifashi al-Maghrebi devotes a whole chapter to the subject of *Sihq*, called: “*Fi Adab al-Musahiqat wa Nawader Akhbarihina wa Mulaḥ Ash‘arihin*.”<sup>9</sup> In the book of *Ruju‘ al-Shaikh ila Sibah*, which was translated by Ibn Kamal Pasha at the request of the Ottoman Sultan Salim the First, there is a chapter with the title “*al-Adwiya al-Lati Tutib al-Suhq ila al-Nisa' Hatta Yashtafina bihi ‘an Jami‘ ma Hunna Fihi, wa Ya'khudhna ‘Alayhi al-Hayaman wa al-Junun*.”<sup>10</sup> Writing on sexual subjects flourished in a strange way and became a social necessity. In addition to writing, illustration of pictures and colors were added to the various depictions of sexual positions and poses.

It is said that the physician Ibn Masawayhi said: “I read in the classical books that *Sihq* is created when the feeding mother eats celery, watercress, and sweet clover. If she eats a lot and breast-feeds the baby, she passes that to the labia of the baby girl, where itching takes place, and the remedy of this sickness is prostitution.”

They also established rules and types for sexual intercourse and *Sihq*. Women classified types of *Sihq* as *dafda‘i*/like a frog, *shira‘i*/like a sail, *mukhalef*/opposite, *mu‘alef*/similar, *istiklab*/like a dog, etc. They also prescribed manners for *Sihq* in which they described how the two lesbians (*Sihqiyatan*) should act. These manners were more strictly followed among the rich aristocratic classes than among the working classes where the practices were sometimes banal and hackneyed.

Lesbianism is based on “*al-Zurf/Cutism*” and therefore, lesbians call themselves by that name (*al-Zurf* = the Cute). If we say that someone is “*Zarifa*,” we mean that she is a *Sahiqqa*/lesbian. Lesbians fall in love with each other as a man falls in love with a woman, and even further. One of the two is likely to love the other so strongly that she might spend on her partner as a man spends on his sweetheart or even more. It is said that Ahmad bin Yusuf al-Tifashi, writer of the book

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<sup>8</sup> al-Maghrebi, al-Samaw'al bin Yahya bin Abbas (2008). *Nuzhat al-Ashab fi Mu'asharat al-Ahbab*. Sayyed Kisrawi Hassan. (Ed.) 1st ed. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya.

<sup>9</sup> al-Tifashi al-Maghrebi, Shihab al-Din Ahmad (1992). *Nuzhat al-Albab fima la Yujad fi Kitab*. Jamal Jum'ah. (Ed.) London, Cyprus: Riyadh al-Rayyes li al-Kutb wa al-Nashr.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad bin Suleiman – Ibn Kamal Pasha. (1891). *Ruju‘ al-Shaikh ila Sibah fi al-Quwa ‘ala al-Bah*. Egypt.

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*Nuzhat al-Albab*, described an event that he observed saying: “I observed a lesbian woman who had a lot of money and property. She spent on her beloved one all her gold and silver. When she spent everything, and people blamed her a lot, she gave her [lover] all her property, which was about five thousand dinars. Lesbians used to put a lot of perfume on their body and hair and take care to wear clean clothes and have the best kinds of food and vessels, and wear the most beautiful available things.

Their main position of practicing love was that the lover should be over the beloved, unless the lover is slim and the beloved is fat. In this case, the fat should be over the thin one so that the weight of her side will be more efficient in rubbing. Something [that] is a must in their intercourse is that they should be skilled in coquetry, the quality of breathing and snoring and be perfect in the art of sweet talking that arouses lust during the intercourse. They used to express that, teach it to each other, learn it from one another, and offer gifts to those who are proficient at it so that they would teach it to those who do not know how to practice it well.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is worthwhile pointing out that, linguistically, Arabic uses two different terms for male homosexuality, namely “*liwat*,” and female homosexuality, or “*Sihag*.” Regarding *Sihag*, the subject of this study, the *Lisan al-Arab* Encyclopedic Dictionary gives the following definition and information: *Sahaqa* (verb): rub together or pound strongly; *al-Sahq*: soft, smooth rubbing or pounding after pounding. The term *Sihag* (in Arabic) was given to this phenomenon because the two women rub and pound their genitalia during intercourse.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Munajjid, Salah al-Din (1975). *Al-Haya al-Jinsiyya inda al-'Arab min al-Jahiliyya ila Awakher al-Qarn al-Rabi' al-Hijri*. Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Homosexuality takes place between people of the same sex: it is the lust or desire for someone of the same sex. In other words, the person feels psychological, emotional, and instinctive attraction to people of his or her own sex. This term is commonly used in Western scientific books. The term *Al-Sihag* (in Arabic) is generally translated into “tribadism” or “lesbianism.” Homosexuality means emotional romantic, and sexual attraction between people of the same sex. The term does not necessarily express the sexual behavior of the person and it is not necessary that the person should express his sexual tendencies through actual intercourse. The term “homosexuality” consists of the Greek “homo”/(ὁμός) which means “same” and “sexuality” which is derived from “sex.” “Homo” in “homosexuality” is not the Latin word “Homo”, which means “man” in the Latin expression *Homo Sapiens*, which means “male human being.”

History tells us that many important personalities were homosexual including Socrates, Lord Byron, King Edward the Second. Some scholars like Michel Foucault consider that a risk. For information about Islam’s attitude towards “homosexuality” see: Abd al-Latif, Abd al-Hakim Muhammad (2003). *Jarimat al-Shuzouz al-Jinsi wa 'Uqbatuha fi al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyya wa al-Qanoun*. Naif Arab University for Security Sciences. Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For more information about the subject of homosexuality, see: Room, Adrian. (1986). *A Dictionary of True Etymologies*. p: 84; Bullough, Vern (1990). *Homosexuality/Heterosexuality: Concepts of Sexual Orientation*. Oxford University Press. p: 66; Khaled, El-Rouayheb (2005). *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. University of Chicago Press. p: 159; Feray, Jean-Claude, Manfred, Herzer (1990). “Homosexual Studies and Politics in the Nineteenth Century: Karl Maria Kertbeny” (1990). Trans. by Glen W. Poppel, *Journal of Homosexuality*. 19:1, pp. 34–35; Ellis, Havelock. (2004). *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. vol.1, p: 1–2; Habib, Samar (2012). *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*. Routledge. p: 18; Foucault, Michel (1986). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. p: 55; Wenqing, Kang (2009). “Obsession: male same-sex relations in China, 1900–1950.” Hong Kong University Press. p. 2: in:

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Saba al-Herz's Novel *al-Akharun/ The Others*<sup>13</sup> as a Sample

In one of his letters to his mistress, Louise Colet, Gustave Flaubert says: "It seems that the highest and most difficult thing in art is not that it makes us laugh or cry, not that it arouses desire or anger in us ... but that it makes us dream; the beautiful actions really do that."<sup>14</sup> Here, we do not exaggerate if we say that Seba al-Herz's novel *al-Akharun/The Others* cannot arouse dreams—as Gustave demanded in his description of beautiful works in the reader's soul—but it arouses desire and anger, as if it were written with this in mind. What Seba al-Herz describes in her novel is nothing but so much as a deep penetration into great freedom and deep daring in the narrative field between the theme of time-mines in Arab societies that are perfect at keeping the culture of silence.

Arab writers have dealt with the themes of sex, its deviations, and its various rites in much of their creative work, which places the remote and prohibited aspects of sex at the focal point of the lens of literature, and shows the negative motivations that lie behind it, and its different results.<sup>15</sup>

*Al-Akharun/The Others*, the novel of this study, is one of the feminist Saudi Arabian novels that highlights the cares of the woman and her sufferings in male-dominated societies; it seeks to demolish the past ready-made stereotypes of women, and premeditated attempts to reveal what is hidden in our social life. This novel is classified under the category of "feminist erotic novel" as it is characterized by its daring eroticism that aspires to glorify the female body. The writer makes the female body the focus of the narrative. She celebrates the body and is engaged in drawing out its details and hidden aspects, and openly announcing its desires, inclinations, and whims.

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[http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/Amer\\_Psychological\\_Assn\\_Amicus\\_Curiae\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/Amer_Psychological_Assn_Amicus_Curiae_Brief.pdf); Guardi, Julanda (2014). Female Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature. University of Macerata.

13 Al-Herz, Seba (2006). *Al-Akharun / The Others*. 1st ed., Beirut: Dar al-Saqi. (The name, Seba al-Herz, is a pseudonym for a young Saudi Arabian woman. She adopted this name as a symbolical penname. From her wonderful novel, we understand that she is a distinguished, intelligent, and gifted individual who threw aside all the worn inherited traditions of religious practices, sexual relations, and even politics. She candidly revealed the strange practices that happen behind closed doors in a society that is considered strict and conservative with no tolerance for anyone or anything that is connected to a woman and her body. The Saudi society is dominated by 100% male culture.

14 Michel, Winock. (2016). Flaubert. Trans. by Nicholas Elliott. London: Harvard University Press, p. 94.

15 For example, the novels: *al-Khubz al-Hafi* by Muhammad Shukri, *Ra'ihat al-Saboun* by Rashid Boujadra, *Rihlat Ghandi al-Saghir* by Elias Khoury, *al-Su'al* by Ghaled Hals, *Tawahin Beirut* by Tawfiq Yusuf Awad, and *Harouda* by Taher Jalloun. However, Hanan al-Sheikh's novel *Misk al-Ghazal* differs from the previous novels in that it enters another world of "sex" by dealing with the subject of female homosexuality (Sihqa) and the problematic questions about the text that contribute to revealing the bitter reality of society.



Consequently, the narration centers on sexual practices and love relations, including homosexual relations. Thus, the body in the erotic feminist novel is no longer the stereotypical body that the man weaves and sings for a need of his own that he wants to satisfy. Besides, sex is no longer a “shame” or a clear “sin” that is controlled by moral restrictions and, in this way, the taboo of sex fell from the prohibited trinity in the feminist erotic novel and became an ordinary matter.

What draws our attention in the works of the Saudi writer Seba al-Herz is that she raises themes that have literary daring that is added to her credit. For example, she discusses the theme of *Sihaq*/lesbianism without relying on crude accounts. The novel in this study opens closed worlds that are ordinarily forbidden because it deals with spots that constitute the points of pain in the soul of the suppressed and scared person. This “mask” writing seems to be intended to conceal the pornographic features of the novel.

The novel *al-Akharun/The Others* is narrated in the *first person singular*, which is an autobiographical narrative technique. Nevertheless, we cannot say that the novel is autobiographical because we do not know anything about its writer. Consequently, any approach that is based on a connection between the writer and her heroine seems, in my view, impossible. Because the female narrator is a young Shiite lady, the reader might wonder if her education is compatible with her age, which also makes the reader question how much of the narrative is made by the narrator and how much is projected by the writer on her narrator/heroine? Does everything that the narrator says belong to her or belong also to the writer, especially its linguistic and philosophical aspects? Probably, what makes the reader believe that the words are the heroine’s words and not the author’s is that the heroine is a university student and has made some attempts at writing. Actually, she takes part in publishing a magazine, and consequently, it is not surprising that she has read about Jean Paul Sartre, Milan Kundera, Patrick Suskind, and other writers who have become well-known to Arab readers.

In fact, we had better ask: Who are the “Others?” Why did the publisher choose the words “Akharun/Others” to be printed in red while the name of the author on the cover is in black? Here, it is worthwhile to remember Sartre’s statement, “The Others are Hell!” For the heroine “Others” are also Hell. She has drifted into *Sihaq* after her companions at a party raped her during the war,

and persuaded her that having sex with a member of the party represents a part of their struggle and freedom: "In the course of time, the 'ground floors' of my body were turning into a place of human garbage. When the others become rotten corpses dwelling in me, they refuse to leave and leave me in peace. At night, the situation becomes unbearable; there are screams, noise, accumulation, and [the] redefining of the borders of the authority of each one on his private place in my space."<sup>16</sup>

We also read in the novel that: "The Others are always the others; they are my first care and cause of fear; I do not want anyone to touch me, no one."<sup>17</sup>

The question might return after the reader has finished reading the novel. The "Others" for the narrator/heroine are all like that, which confirms Sartre's statement: "The Others are Hell." Employing this statement to introduce the novel is successful. Besides, the writer's adoption of it is not arbitrarily made. What the Others have done to the narrator has made her a deformed creature who cannot live a normal life. She has become an abnormal sexual person who lives a life in which she is dissatisfied.

'Alya Shu'aib maintains that this cruelty and assault of the woman raped by men who had nominated themselves as protectors of her body and her honor made the woman denounce their guardianship of her. She sees them as the people who steal the most from her. Therefore, she spits them out of her life and moves to live in a more comfortable and pleasant world—the world of women. She sees that there are several axes that push the normal woman to the world of lesbianism: violence, sexual harassment, and rape. She also refers to the existence of emotional or sexual deprivation that is hidden in these women toward other women and not to the man. She says that the woman hates the man because he has become a model of harm and pain. For her, the woman partner becomes the human and emotional substitute with whom she can communicate, love, and have sexual intercourse.<sup>18</sup>

While reading the first pages of the novel, we might also wonder: Why does she use the word "Others" to refer to men and not to women, especially when this relationship is dominated by the female homosexual nature? Soon the reader discovers that the female narrator's

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Herz (2006), *al-Akharun*, p. 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Shu'aib, 'Alya (2001). *Kalam al-Jasad: Dirasa Akhlaqiyya*. Kuwait: Dar Alya li al-Nashr, p. 59.

relationships are not limited to women; she also has relationships with males. The word “Others” includes males and females. It seems that defining the relationship of the heroine narrator (I) with the “Others” is beneficial because of the fact that her relationship with a large number of the “Others” was a “Hell” for her.

In my view, the complaint of the writer Seba al-Herz and her courage in confronting the prohibitions of the taboos lies behind the success of the novel and its popularity. Although the subject of the novel is not new in Arabic literature, *al-Akharun/The Others* is distinctive in that it is written specifically to talk about the lesbian character rather than anything else. The main purpose is to highlight the details of this character, her sufferings, her dreams, her breakdowns, and the manner of her *mutu*. The novel focuses on the intimate relationship between the two main characters: the narrator, whose name is not mentioned, and “Dhai,” who rapes her. The writer says that her heroine, whose name is not given, is a young lesbian girl who studies at al-Dammam College and belongs to the Shiite faith. She practices writing and provides social services through religious magazines at Hussayniyyat, which are congregation halls for the Shiite commemoration ceremonies of giving condolences. She sometimes has fits of epilepsy: “every night, my last call before I close my eyes was that my secret will not be revealed, and I will not go under the gallows of ‘pity’. I have never felt ashamed of my fit[s] of epilepsy. My sickness constituted a horrible defect in comparison with my physical perfection, but it is a probable human defect; now I feel ashamed of my saliva leaking from the side of my lip.”<sup>19</sup>

The heroine lives in al-Qatif region and tells of a stormy love story between her, another young girl, and other girls who are her friends and colleagues: Dhai, Darin, Balqis, Sondos, Hidaya, and Heba.

She also describes the lesbian relationships between the heroine and her friends in minute detail with respect to their sincerity, intimate agitated emotions, and the pleasure and ecstasy that they experience in love-making. She also describes the conflicting thoughts one experiences simultaneously between physical sexual desire and religious thoughts, prohibitions, and taboos.

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Herz (2006), *al-Akharun*, p. 93–95.

However, the writer shows the heroine's feelings of repentance and regret for engaging in these practices.

In addition to the university campus at al-Dammam College, al-Hussayniyya became a place for meeting and finding acquaintances. It was the most convenient place for making dates, listening to frank speeches, and making revelations between the young girls freely and without any obstacles by anyone. The girls could exchange their feelings, and agree on intimate meetings, which usually took place inside their bedrooms in their private dwelling places, where they slept naked together on one double bed like husband and wife.

They would start with a hot intimate kiss on the lips, and then the kiss would move to the lower parts of the body including the neck and the breasts; they would then move lower to the thighs and the sexual organs.

Thus, without mentioning the specific name of the heroine, the narrator takes the role of narrating the events. Consequently, a conflict arises in herself between the beauty of her body and its urgent and exciting physiological needs on the one hand, and the traditions of her society on the other. The conflict takes place in her mind in considering the strict and closed religious doctrine with its taboos and prohibitions, which are subject to the rules of being "allowed" or "prohibited." These rules do not allow the Saudi woman the most basic of her human rights. The heroine in this case feels confused as to how to coordinate her physical and sexual needs: "Though I participated in organizing successful programs in the activities at the end of Ramadan, I did not feel that I submitted [a] suitable apology to God or to myself. I remained drowned in shyness and a feeling that my guilt is dripping from my limbs. I understood in advance that I did that under the motivation of temporary consumption so that I would not meet myself and have conflict with[in] myself."<sup>20</sup>

The heroine falls under the control of Dhai, who is one of her intimate friends, and with whom she has sex continually—once in the room of the heroine at her house, and once in Dhai's private room at the house she lives in. Dhai played the role of the "lover" and the heroine the role

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 15–16.

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of the “beloved”: “The speech kept silent, Balqis’s madness remained with me; her desire [for] me dried [up] gradually and then died completely... I met you and loved you. I loved you since our first handshake at al-Hussayniya...I have been closing my eyes on you and open[ing] them on you.”<sup>21</sup>

In a dialogue between Dhai and the heroine, we read Dhai’s words when she suffers from strong jealousy about her beloved (the heroine): “Do you know I will kill you if you betray me? Did anyone precede me to your body? Answer me? ...There was no one there. Are you happy?”<sup>22</sup> In a long dialogue with herself when she imagines the heroine, Dhai says: “Now, and as you are my own possession, I now know that birthmark beside your left breast; I can now touch that red nipple, and kiss that red nipple, and lick that red nipple, and sleep on that red nipple, and after that, I fear that you might be tired of me and leave me.”<sup>23</sup>

It is worthwhile mentioning here that social studies establish the concept of sharing in a lesbian relationship. What encourages and eases the lesbian relationship, some lesbians believe, is the positive feminine and aesthetic details psychologically. The woman plays the other woman during the lesbian relationship without occupying or possessing her lover as occurs in a relationship with a man. In the lesbian relationship, both bodies remain safe and independent in an overwhelming and overflowing feeling of security and safety due to the lack of risk over losing one’s virginity or pregnancy.”<sup>24</sup>

This point of view contradicts Abd al- ‘Atti Kiwan’s point of view, which argues that the woman’s writing is writing about prostitution. Kiwan does not see any connection between this writing and the world of literature and says: “the creator here is a woman who writes about herself, about her meeting with the other, about her lust and deprivation, about sexual intercourse and its color; it is a woman who adopts the role of a prostitute or a prostitute who adopts the role of a writer; she interrogates the body and uncovers its vocabulary in a special language.”<sup>25</sup> In Evelyn Accad’s opinion, these opinions that attack the author result from men’s fear of women, especially of women’s sexual activity; therefore, men resort to excluding the woman and persecuting

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21 Ibid. p. 146–148.

22 Ibid. p. 49–51.

23 Ibid. p. 149.

24 Shu’uib, ‘Alya (2001). *Kalam al-Jasad: Dirasa Akhlaqiyya*, p. 27.

25 Abd al-‘Atti, Kiwan (2003). *Adab al-Jasad bayn al-Fan wa al-Isfaf – Dirasa fi al-Sard al-Nisa’i*. Cairo: Markiz al-Hadhara al-‘Arabiyya, p. 57.

her.<sup>26</sup>

This novel also describes sadistic relationships such as the one between Dhai and the heroine: "I was under her with my two hands tied to the bed post, unable to move the wrist of my left hand... I was afraid to open my eyes... I pulled something from her dresser and blindfolded my eyes... Then she surrounded me with her legs... she was tearing my clothes randomly... I was naked, and she was uncovering me, searching in my body [for] another smell...; then like someone who has suddenly woken up to see himself walking while he is asleep...then she stood up all of a sudden... she untied my hands and took off my eye band." <sup>27</sup>

The heroine also makes relationship with her friend Darin because she likes to vary her relationships. She describes a certain situation with her in one of her intimate meetings. She says: "She drew me with my hand to a door that opens onto a small hall in the kitchen and slammed the door behind us. We rushed into a feverish kiss; our hands were moving loosely; our breaths were heaving; I kissed her and kissed her, and said intoxicatingly: "Damn you! You drove me crazy!" She laughed and her smile stung me; it pumped in my blood a great desire, with more craziness"<sup>28</sup>. The heroine continues her experience with Darin and feels the difference between her and Dhai. She says: "With Darin, I felt that I possess sufficient safety to make me put my heart on the table beside us, without fear that she will steal it when I am not paying attention to her.

She was tempting me slowly; she lit two candles and whispered to me about scandals that made my body tremble; she was always neutral, if I wanted to involve her as a third party, between me and my body. With her, my body parts have different names, including the secret ones. Our seconds had special expressions, and I discovered that what I considered cheap obscenity that does not suit Darin and her great kindness, is a kind of dirty obscene excitement. Who said that obscenity does not arouse a feeling of elation? Our physical relation was 'sex' and not what I used to call by hinting at it as 'that thing'!<sup>29</sup> She says: I craved in her [...]a man who will not come. In return, Darin wished to be that waited for man who would suddenly appear! The

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26 Evelyn, Accad (1990). *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of Middle East*. New York University Press, p. 19.

27 Al-Herz, Seba (2006). *Al-Akharun*, p. 155–157.

28 *Ibid.* p. 137.

29 *Ibid.* p. 178.

heroine of the novel suddenly pays attention “to the missing human being in my life; there was no man, in my last wishes, and the smallest and most hidden ones; there was no man.”<sup>30</sup>

Abdalla Ibrahim reinforces the concept of sharing or ‘participation’ in lesbian relations versus male superiority that the woman feels in her practice of sexual intercourse with the man. Regarding the relationship with a man, he says that it has a further feature: the male empties the female of all her feminine energy through his virile dispossession, which is based on the idea of “victory” and “domination.” Female homosexuality, in contrast, is based on the foundation of “partnership” or the idea of unlimited mutual “giving” between similar bodies. There is no monopolization in these relationships because the idea of mutual satisfaction is the motive for the relationship.<sup>31</sup>

This is confirmed and observed by the novel in a different place, where we read about the admission of the inevitability and necessity of keeping away from the man and dispensing with him: “We, women, [have] commit[ted] the same mistake since the beginning of life. We abridge all our life in the man, who stamped his name on us; we leave our parents, friendships, certificates of our studies, our dreams and our small and trivial things and engage in worship in the praying niche of a man.

The man, in turn, does not do much. He keeps the motion of his circles and their momentum. They expand more and more and we stay merely a point within that crowdedness. That is really an exaggerated simplicity.”<sup>32</sup>

Although the heroine chooses the “natural” track at the end of the novel, and feels satisfied with it, and disgusted about the deviation and abnormality of the homosexual relationship of a female with a female, she feels comfortable with the natural relationship between a female and a male despite its illegitimacy; through the internet, she falls, into a love-relationship with “Omar,” who differs from her in his religious faith. From his name, we conclude that he is a young Sunni man with whom she becomes physically close in a moment of desire.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>31</sup> Ibrahim, Abd Allah (2011). *Al-Sard al-Niswi: al-Thaqafa al-Abawiyya, al-Hawiyya al-'Unthawiyya wa al-Jasad*. Beirut li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Herz, Seba (2006). *Al-Akharun*, p. 53–54.

The novel ends with the twenty-third and twenty-fourth sections. The relationship the twenty-third is a deviation: “Don’t you want to hug me? I want [to]. She inserted her hand under my shirt. Why do you torture me? Kiss me before the cigarettes spoil the taste of your mouth. She kissed me and our kiss was extinguished quickly.”<sup>33</sup> It was natural in section twenty-four: “Omar, kiss me now! Why now? I will not ask for it another time. Are you sure? Let us say that if you do not kiss me in three seconds, I will take the kiss by myself.” She says to him: “Omar, take me, take all of me, and he took me, took me, not as Dhai took me.”<sup>34</sup> In all our fighting in bed, neither in that light way that Darin exerted on me, nor in that fear and disgrace of a high heel on my body for years. From time to time, as a result of [an] excess of lust or love, I was about to say: ‘Do something so that you will not stay outside me. Don’t steal your babies from me!’” The heroine continues<sup>35</sup> her description and says: “It is strange that I do not miss our bodily action and do not feel that my body yearns [for] what used to be; what I specifically miss is those little small details that do not draw attention within the intertwinement of the image and its mess. My fingers are on the dimples of her cheeks... her sadness, her gloomy face when she is sad. We missed ourselves asleep, I on my back, and she on her abdomen. Each of us is looking at the other; the world is disappearing and empty, except for us. I miss her voice, the hoarseness of her voice when she wakes up. I miss her playing with the sleeve of my shirt, when she talked, and I miss her forefinger in my mouth.”<sup>36</sup>

From this passage, we notice the writer’s distinctive ability to describe the “external” and “internal” scenes, which look like lively and suggestive paintings in the *first*, but in the *second*, she dives deep into the soul and sometimes into the body. In fact, there is an attempt to concentrate on redrawing the psychological elements in different images that the writer might feel; despite their quality, they are beyond his ability to enjoy them as many images crowd into one another to convey what might be only one condition.

Seba al-Herz adopts the method of realistic narration in her novel *al-Akharun/The Others*. It is a serious novel that is written with an unprecedented artistic and historical awareness among Saudi novels. She allows her voice to be free and does not fear the scissors of the censor, who is

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 261–263.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 274–275.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 284.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 160.



still exerting his authority and domination over the critical mind by cutting the writer's tongue, eradicating it, and probably wishing to cut off her hands if he is not satisfied with cutting the words.

In my view, the novel belongs to what is called "the Damned Literature" which is dominated by conditions of psychological confusion, masochistic relations, and tragic features that lie behind deceptive appearances; their suspicious truth is well-understood by girls. However, the writer/ heroine does not for a second give up on the art of fiction and its data and dimensions. Seba al-Herz possesses a great talent and deep cultural knowledge. As a narrator, she enters the depths of the characters and delves into both the unconscious individual and the collective unconsciousness to cleverly depict the relationships.

The novel also activates suppressed and failing freedom despite its celebration of femininity and dispraise of masculinity. It is a tragic novel that has little irony and it draws a picture of a dark gloomy life that is established on the margins. Although the presence of the man seems to be slight and is limited to two names, the heroine's brother, Hassan, is strongly present through his absence. His ghost does not leave the imagination of the sick sister or her memory, though he has been dead for years.

In addition, the novel constitutes a "sample" of the search for a future that opens up all the possibilities for Arab women writers. In this context, it is important that we realize the new reality of all women writers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabian. We should also realize that this reality is represented in the obvious exit of woman's writing from its traditional types—it is no longer possible to put her back into the bottle in which she was living. The novel *al-Akharun/The Others* confirms the truth of researcher Fawziya Abu Khaled's statement that foresees the emergence of a Saudi feminist trend that aspires to end the isolation of the Saudi woman through creation of a "feminist empire" versus a "man's empire." She also believes that the Saudi woman is on the way to overcome all the obstacles that are imposed on her humanity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Selim, Miriam (2004). *Al-Mar'ah al-'Arabiyya bayn Thiqa al-Waqi' wa Tatallu' at al-Taharur*. Beirut: Markiz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, pp. 214–220.

## Summary

*Literature of the Bed*, including female homosexuality, is spreading extensively in the Arab library. It can be considered a sign of the dominance of the neo-liberal thought on the Arab socio-linguistic awareness in the current period. The main issue in this literature is not the distinctiveness of its narration or daring descriptions of normal or abnormal forms of sexual intercourse, nor its description of sexual practice as an expression of social culture and relations, but its definition of the concept of “freedom” as a matter of personal freedom, first and foremost.

The main point here is that, in her imagined narrative writing about lesbianism, the woman expresses her objection, resistance, and refusal to the man, and that motivates her to create alternative women characters that interact with each other in the sexual game, thereby confirming that she no longer needs the man.

Since the 1980s, feminist literature has been characterized by a tremendous revolution against the prevailing literary and social norms in Arab society. It has not spared any means that is likely to achieve its goal in resisting those norms and demolishing them. The novel *al-Akharun/The Others* told the truth about what goes on in closed, religiously strict societies and the extent of the negative impact of that strictness on the abnormal deviational practices. The style of novelist Seba al-Herz is characterized by frankness, daring, and courage. It is also interesting, enjoyable, smooth and simple but inimitable.

The novel *al-Akarun/The Others* is considered one of the most exciting novels in Arab society in general and the Gulf-Saudi society in particular owing to the deep and severe criticism that it introduces through its total daring, openness, and bravery. The Saudi writer, Seba al-Herz’s novel is a call for the end to the suppression and terror that is practiced on the individual’s social and intellectual liberties in general and on women in particular.

In my view, the novel implies the right of the author’s presence on the Saudi literary scene. Seba al-Herz possesses the secrets of novelistic writing and its keys. There is no doubt that she is

either very lucky or very brave, and because of her anger, she has turned her revelations into a loud cry whose echoes have reached beyond the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and begun to be repeated in all the Arab countries.

Finally, I believe that the novel *al-Akharun/The Others* will remain a source of controversy and debate and will cause a lot of ink to flow than other novels like *Banat al-Riyadh* thanks to her courage and in-depth treatment of a problem that is considered one of the most difficult, ambiguous, and sophisticated problems in the Arab world.

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