



Masculinity as Violence in Arab Women's Fiction

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Introduction

Feminist literary theorists have, until recently, focused on the treatment of women as Other in texts written by men. Although this is an extremely important project for feminists, especially because of the weight that men's writing continues to have in the canon, I feel that in order to decentre men's writing and to understand the roles men play in women's lives, it is also important to analyze how women authors are representing men. In this paper, I have examined some of the writings by Arab women authors who have managed to be accepted into the Arabic literary canon and how men and masculinity are represented in their texts.

The most striking characteristic associated with men and masculinity in Arab women's writing is violence. Men's violence in these texts may either be on a small-scale, aimed at individual women, or may reflect a larger violence toward ethnic or religious groups or indeed society as a whole. This violence may be organized and legitimized by the state, as in the case of war, or may be an unforeseen passionate reaction; it may be an isolated incident or a chain of violent acts; it may be enacted as a tangible incident of physical violence or it may remain as an omnipresent threat. But as different as the repre-

sentations of violence may be, what is common is that the more masculine a man is, the more violent, and vice versa. Conversely women and femininity are represented as pacifistic, as rejecting violence. While some individual men may be less violent they are depicted as more feminine, and there is still a strong association between men's sub-culture and violence as masculinity. Because culture is dominated to a large extent by men, the culture of violence is pervasive and forces itself upon the female characters, who generally reject it. This connection between men, masculinity, and violence can be witnessed in texts written by Arab women authors. Here I look at how this connection is constructed by looking at the depiction of individual men as violent, violent women, and men who resist violence, and then use the notion of the Other as outlined by Foucault and Cixous to analyze the significance of these representations.

I have chosen to look at texts that have been translated into English not only because the fact that they have been translated demonstrates the general importance that the texts have been given but also because this should provide all readers of this paper access to the texts themselves should they wish to continue the investigation in greater depth themselves. It is always a diffi-

cult and dangerous task to generalize anything relating to Arab women; this term refers to women who possess a range of identities across disparate geographic and historical spaces. With this in mind, I am simply looking for common trends in Arab women's writing without hoping to produce any "truths" that are supposed to reflect all Arab women's experiences. Due to the length and time constraints of this essay, I only refer to the texts that best illustrate the representation of masculinity as violence. The authors referred to here are Hoda Barakat, Salwa Bakr, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Sufi Abdallah.

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Feminists have demonstrated in countless works that traditional definitions of violence do not adequately represent male violence against women. Because they ignore the systematic and pervasive nature of violence against women, often these definitions, usually incorporating physical violence only, are too narrow. Like the feminist sociologists and philosophers who have

studied violence against women, I have adopted a woman-centered definition of violence; that is, I am including as violent those behaviors or actions that women experience as dangerous and abusive. This expands the traditional definition of violence from straightforward physical violence to include emotional and sexual violence, abuse and exploitation, and the threat of violence. All of these forms of violence are connected with masculinity in many Arab women writers' texts.

Violent Men

Masculinity is generally equated with violence and individual men are depicted as unrestrained and unruly when it comes to women. Such men in Arab women's texts are most often flat characters where their aggression is their primary personality traits and their relationship with the women protagonists is characterized by violence. In these texts, men become their violence and all other aspects of their selves disappear. In *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh nearly every man the protagonist Zahra encounters exploits or abuses her in some way. From the earliest years of her life, Zahra learns the violent potential of men from her father. This father beats not only Zahra's mother for suspected infidelity but Zahra herself. He "showers her with blows" that she

might admit her mother's betrayal, and her mother is left bloodied (Al-Shaykh, 1995, pp. 14-15). Later in her life, Zahra rarely mentions her father except to express his attitude toward her—ranging from indifferent to negative, or to express a fear that he might kill her: "my father's image, coming into my mind, frightened me to the extent where I felt sure he would kill me should he ever find out. He would not hesitate, I knew, even if it meant him spending the rest of his life in prison. He was capable of severing my head from my body." (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 31).

After her father, the next man she forms a relationship with is her first lover, Malek. A married man and friend of Zahra's brother, Malek manipulates Zahra by offering friendship and romance in order to seduce her. After taking her virginity, knowing well the consequences for an unmarried woman without a hymen in the Arab world, Malek refuses to marry her. The friendship, romance, and even any semblance of care disappears; even after two pregnancies and abortions, Zahra is left feeling used as Malek still does not feel any attachment or responsibility toward her. Even when Zahra has a nervous breakdown and needs to be hospitalized after Malek takes her for an abortion without her consent, Malek evades responsibility by lying to her family about the situation and saying that the breakdown occurred at work and that he came to her rescue (Al-Shaykh, 1995, pp. 38-9).

After the breakdown, Zahra decides to escape to Africa and ends up in her uncle's house. Again, the uncle, Hashem, who was a leader in a violent coup d'état in Lebanon, abuses her. As the only person she knows in Africa, Zahra is dependant on Hashem, and he takes advantage of this situation. Although the beginnings may seem innocent, such as when he watches her sleep and tries to hold her hand, Zahra is disgusted and disturbed by her uncle's advances. But when his desire pushes him to lie on top of her, as she is sleeping, Zahra again suffers a breakdown and tries to kill herself.

While recovering in hospital, Zahra chooses to accept a marriage proposal from Hashem's friend Majed. Majed is a patient and forgiving husband, but still there exists in him a subtle and latent violence. He is emotionally abusive toward her, insulting her with unnecessary cruelty: "You look like a cat that has just eaten its own kittens," he said. "How is it possible for anyone to wear such a short, tight skirt? Who do you think you are, girl? ...It would be all very nice if the short skirt showed a pretty figure. But look at you, look at all this make-up. Your face is no better than a Halloween mask." (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 96)

After several fits Majed's patience is exhausted, and he reacts violently when Zahra refuses his sexual advances:

He tried to put his arms around me. I slipped away. He drew close. I stepped back. He followed. I screamed, but he ignored my cries. I tried to push his hand away, but he was set on having a fight.... I forced him away, making up my mind that he would never touch me unless I were dead, lifeless, as it had been with our foreign neighbour...when she defended herself to the death as the hair-dresser tried to rape her....

Majed remained insistent, and "I [Zahra] went on defending myself until my resistance began to fail, my crying still having no effect. Then I bit his hand with all my strength and heard him bellow, 'Damned woman! Bitch! Animal!'...I fell on the floor as he pushed and then kicked me. He threw me down on the couch as I went on ceaselessly screaming and moaning" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, pp. 108-9).

Zahra then requests that Majed divorce her and she returns to Lebanon. There she becomes involved with the next and last man in her life. The Lebanon she has returned to is raging with war and violence. Even Zahra's brother Ahmad, the only man who until this point has not acted violently, has become a combatant. Every trip outside the house could amount to suicide. But when she is out one day, she notices the neighborhood sniper watching her. They meet, and they have a sexual relationship. With this sniper, Zahra experiences her first sexual pleasure; she falls in love with him and even entertains thoughts of marriage. But when she discovers she is pregnant and too far along to abort, she tells her sniper. He is supportive to her face, but when she leaves him, she is shot from the rooftop. Every relationship with a man that Zahra has had in her life is characterized by violence and abuse. Though some of the violence she has witnessed by the men in her life is part of the war, most of it is directed at her.

Violent Women

One might argue that there also exist violent women in texts written by Arab women. Yet, upon closer examination, it will be noticed that in most cases the violence of women is represented as aberrant, abnormal, and not an essential characteristic of the women's personality. Whereas violent men are represented as little more than their violent actions, violent women are represented as "naturally" non-violent. They are only pushed into violence as a necessary reaction to their circumstances, which are usually depicted as caused by men. In this way, as Nadjé al-Ali writes, the authors "turn around the roles of criminal and victim by demonstrating how the real criminals are not the women of the prison, but those considered to be their victims." (Al-Ali, 1994, p. 63). The novel *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr demonstrates this.

The Golden Chariot, a novel set in al-Qanatir women's prison, also tells the tale of a group of criminal women. They are not only abused by individual men (as in *The Story of Zahra*), but are victims of the masculine culture of violence as a whole. All of the women in the prison are there "as a reaction to men abusing their bodies, men being unfaithful, dishonest, exploitative and violent" (Faqir, 1995, p. v) and all of the violent crimes committed by the inmates, which range from castration to murder, have occurred as a result of "the violation suffered by them at the hands of men" (Manisty in Faqir, 1995, p.v). The male characters in Bakr's work tend to be flat and essentially violent toward women.

The main character, Aziza is in prison for killing her stepfather who had sexually abused her since childhood. After the death of her mother, and fearing his abandoning her and taking a second wife, Aziza determines to kill him. Before committing the act, she imagines how to accomplish the deed in the least violent, most romantic possible way - as she does love the man. She imagines coating him in chocolate and breaking him into edible pieces, or alternatively smothering him with the powerful scent of flowers. (Bakr, 1995, pp. 8-9). The other women in the prison who were charged with violent crimes similarly committed them against an abusive man. Two besides Aziza were murderers and two had committed assault.

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Azima the giant, as she is known in the text, is a woman imprisoned for having had her ex-lover castrated. The man, Hussain, whom she loved deeply, had exploited her sexually and financially, offering promises of marriage and lifetime love. In reality, however, he was only in the relationship to gain access to her wealth. After years of being used by him, when Azima finally realized that he was only using her, she ended the relationship. Hussain began spreading vicious rumors about her that greatly damaged her reputation. In order to avenge herself Azima hires a career-criminal to castrate the former lover. Another imprisoned for assault is Jamalata who is a poor thief who threw a hot iron at a neighbor. This man had been stalking Jamalata and her younger mentally disabled sister. Jamalata was less afraid for herself than she was for her sister, whom she feared she could not always protect

and of whom she was afraid the man would take advantage. Despite repeated warnings, the neighbor continues to bother the girls. When one day he arrives at their apartment, Jamalata fulfils her threats and assaults him with the iron.

The only murderess whose victim was not her lover is Madame Zaynab. A wealthy member of the aristocracy, Madame Zaynab murders her brother-in-law who, by various means, tries to acquire her inheritance after she is widowed. Although she puts up with most of his schemes to access her dead husband's wealth, Zaynab turns violent when he manages to convince a court that she is an unfit mother by making accusations of sexual impropriety. When the court delivers its decision that the uncle should be given custody of her sons, Zaynab shoots the uncle.

Hinna is an elderly woman who murdered her husband. After several years of emotional and sexual abuse, Hinna can no longer be with the man who had "sex with her no less than nine times on her wedding night, despite the terrible pain that she suffered and which made her beg him to desist from the painful act that made her feel as though she was going to die" (Bakr, 1995, p. 39). As time goes by she begins to fear that he will take a new young bride to fulfill his insatiable sexual appetite, and fears that she will be thrown out of the home in her old age. In order to pre-empt this, she leaves the gas oven on overnight and kills her husband while he sleeps.

All of the above characters were represented as passive and gentle, and their crimes as aberrant single acts that went against their nature and were only a direct reaction to the violence their victims inflicted upon them. Not one of them is represented as having a violent or even aggressive personality. These acts are portrayed as solely situational, where anyone, no matter how naturally non-violent, would have done the same. Regarding Madame Zaynab, Bakr writes, "People found it impossible to imagine that this beautiful, petite woman, as fragile as fine crystal, was capable of such a thing; they never knew...that she could have done it a second, third, or fourth time were she ever to be placed in a similar situation again." (Bakr, 1995, p. 150). It can be seen in all of these cases that the women would not have acted violently had they not been threatened by their male "victims".

Men Resisting Violence

Not all males are represented in these texts as violent. Those who resist violence, however, are not seen as men by society. It is in these cases that the connection between violence and masculinity is the most striking. Unlike the majority of male characters in fiction by Arab women, this type of character is round and is likely a

protagonist, and he is represented as abnormal. His relationship and resistance to violence is a struggle between himself and the person he feels he should be, that society wants him to be. Both the short story "Eight Eyes" by Sufi Abdallah and the novel *The Stone of Laughter* by Hoda Barakat deal with struggle.

The "eight eyes" after which the story is entitled are those of men in an Upper Egyptian village that haunt the story's protagonist. The young hero, Ismail, is expected by them to avenge his father's death in a blood feud. Ismail, on his part, sees the violence as unnecessary and believes that "justice [has] run its course". (Abdallah, 1990, p. 334). When he expresses this reluctance to the village men, Ismail feels that their eyes tear into him in judgment, saying, "The Young man is spineless...Hasanain did not have a son. He had two daughters: Haniya and Ismail." In order to assert himself as a man, Ismail feels that he must fulfill the violent expectation imposed upon him. Ismail has a nightmare that he killed the intended victim, and wakes up with a scream to tell his mother: "His eyes were innocent, modest like two doves. Yet the eight eyes continued to chase me and burn my breast with their looks: Be a man, Ismail. Be a man!" (Abdallah, 1990, p. 335). His mother responds that she is proud of Ismail's pacifism and asserts that she has taught him to be like that, to behave better than the beasts. In this way, the author identifies pacifism with women and violence with men. The mother appears to reject violence "naturally", whereas Ismail's pacifism is learned. All of the other men in the story accept the violent practice of blood feuds without question.

Ismail laments, "Mother, why did God make me a man?" (Abdallah, 1990, p. 335). Ismail does not necessarily question why society expects violent behavior from men and not women, but rather his own suitability as a man. In this way, the author, while criticizing the use of unnecessary violence, equates violence with men and pacifism with women as if they are natural and even essential characteristics of men and women.

The Stone of Laughter even more explicitly equates masculinity with violence. The novel by Hoda Barakat traces the transformation of the protagonist, Khalil, from an effeminate mainly homosexual man to a powerful, masculine war-monger and rapist. Khalil begins as a man who embodies mainly feminine traits in both body and behavior. He is physically slight and underdeveloped, and is described as an adolescent with "more female hormones in him than there should naturally be." (Barakat, 1995, p. 75). The story is set against the background of the Lebanese civil war, and while his friends (male) are busy with demonstrations, politics, and warfare, Khalil is concerned with housekeeping, his rela-

tionships, and his identity. All of his actions are those associated with women - cleaning, cooking, handicrafts, daydreaming, analyzing the actions of loved ones, and so forth. Furthermore, he compares himself to women several times throughout the novel: a housewife (Barakat, 1995, pp. 10 and 33), an old maid (Barakat, 1995, p. 10), a divorcee "who sits, squat, and pudgy on a stone that has witnessed the beloved" (Barakat, 1995, p. 23). Through the bulk of the novel, Khalil is portrayed in this effeminate way, and the metaphors he employs are associated with the female rather than the male. Amongst these feminine traits is Khalil's aversion to violence. He is apolitical and sees the war mainly as a nuisance that affects the immaculately clean state of his apartment. Unlike all of the other male characters, Khalil's main feelings for the war are for those he loves who die because of the war. He reveals, as is the case in many war novels with female protagonists written by Arab women, that "wars involve not only guns and ideologies in conflict, but, more essentially human beings". (Amyuni, 1993, p. 10). In a world that is permeated by violence, Khalil manages for most of the story to remain a neutral pacifist.

Eventually, the reader begins to notice a change; it is almost imperceptibly gradual, and initiated by three crises. The first and second force Khalil to question his sexual and gendered identity. The first occurs after the assassination of his love-object and boyhood friend, Naji. Disturbed by erotic dreams and feelings toward his dead friend, he tries to persuade himself that this is just a passing phase:

After Naji was killed, Khalil's body...began to get confused, the surface of his inhibitions was slit open and his suspicious dreams invaded him, they unfastened the ties by which he kept a grip on many intricate and ambiguous matters, the least of which were his erotic dreams which used to shake him like a violent storm. They would batter him with their sharp little hatchets and, after he woke up, he would struggle to gather up the fragments and rack his brain to analyze them, which helped a lot but did not completely wipe out his feeling of anxiety...Khalil knew that a fear of blood to the point of faintness, having short legs, a slight build, straight chestnut hair and large eyes, all these things do not make a man a hermaphrodite, or effeminate, or make him any less masculine, or...queer. He knew that the temporary breakdown that he was suffering was only a psychological crisis that the mad world outside has imposed upon him.... (Barakat, 1995, p. 75).

During the second crisis, Khalil's relationship with the violence that surrounds him begins to change. Because he is disturbed by his lustful feelings for his young

cousin, Khalil finds himself encouraging the new object of his affection, Youssef, to join the fighting. This way Khalil does not have to be tortured by Youssef's presence and poisonous honey (Barakat, 1995, p. 81), but Khalil is disgusted with himself for pushing Youssef to be the man that he could not be and allowing himself to indulge in a feminine role:

The truth is, I'm using him to test things out...to see how to go back to the bosom of the group, to see what I'm not able to test for myself because I'm a coward.... I'm using him to test things out so I can pull back and feel my nausea, so I don't have to go out and do the dirty work for money.... All that toil because Youssef is beautiful and because I'm a wife of the wrong sex (Barakat, 1995, p. 115).

It is after this second crisis, when Youssef is killed, that Khalil begins to become slightly more masculine in his behavior and attitude. He stops cleaning his house, goes out more with his political friends, gets a job (which until this point he has resisted), forgets sentimentality and rents out Naji's old apartment and sells whatever has been left behind.

The final crisis occurs when Khalil meets an older gay man, who guesses Khalil's sexual orientation. Known only as "the Brother", this man is a powerful political figure, a leader in the war and in weapons smuggling. He expresses his desire for Khalil, thus giving Khalil the first opportunity in his life to consummate his homosexual feelings. This confuses Khalil even more, causing mixed feelings:

Khalil realized that what drew him to the Brother, what drew him like a magnet, was that he knew how intensely the Brother desired him.... People desire and lust for those who realize the extent of their desire for them.... Desire mingled with acute nausea. With hatred verging on the pleasure of torture. More torture from this man who is often tormented in his attempts to reach me, stamp his imprint on my soul and possess it, so I become like him. Khalil thought: we certainly become like the people we have sex with and I do not want to be like this man. (Barakat, 1995, p. 194).

Khalil does not have sex with the Brother, but he does become like him. He is attacked on the street by armed men, but when he shows them the Brother's business card, they desist. He becomes angry and filled with hatred for the world, for his weakness, and for being given the opportunity by the Brother to become an active member of society. He has no choice but to become what is required of a man in a violent, dangerous situation - violent and aggressive. In the epilogue of

the book, which is several weeks or months later, the change to masculinity is complete. The man that the reader was introduced to at the beginning of the novel has disappeared, replaced with a cold, powerful arms dealer. The proof of the shift to masculinity occurs when Khalil rapes a woman neighbor. The ultimate expression of Khalil's transformation is his transformation into a violent man—one who not only supports a violent war that he may provide for himself, but also acts violently and without cause toward one of the weakest members of society, a single mother.

In tracing the transformation of a man from feminine to masculine and paralleling it with a shift from disinterested pacifism to cold-blooded violence, Barakat establishes violence as the strongest characteristic of masculinity. Because rape and leadership in war are written to mark the culmination of Khalil's transition into masculinity, violence is set up as the epitome of manhood.

Conclusions

Drawing primarily on the theories of literary theorist Jacques Derrida, scholars have explored the ways in which authors represent the Other. Derrida suggests that the human mind tends to view the world in terms of binary oppositions, where one term is given more value; for example, self/Other, good/bad, strong/weak, and so forth (Eagleton, 1996). Each part of the binary defines the other, with the valued part of the binary being the prime signifier. Each set of binary opposites becomes linked to other similar sets, so that "strong" may be associated with "good" and "weak" with "bad". Because of the relationship between the binary oppositions, people tend to align themselves with the valued parts of the binaries and view anyone who is different to themselves, who is "Other", as having negative traits. Helene Cixous, the French feminist literary theorist, adopts Derrida's understanding of binary oppositions and develops it further by arguing that the primary opposition is male/female and that all other binaries follow (Moi, 1985). Feminist scholars have elaborated on this notion in their analyses of the textual representation of women by male authors. They suggest that while men represent themselves as good, rational, known, normal, autonomous, and so forth, they represent women, the Other, as evil, emotional, foreign, abnormal dependant and so forth.

In my analysis of Arab women's writings, I found that female authors also tend to represent men as Other, with characteristics in opposition to their own. The difference, however, is that women writers seem to disturb the ordered sets, so that while men may have opposite traits, these traits are not necessarily associated with

other sets of opposites. Therefore, women represent themselves as good, but also caring, emotional, pacifist, strong, wise, and so forth, and men in these texts become bad, selfish, insensitive, violent, weak, and insensible.

Because of this fundamental disruption of the binary opposites, where women have been able to become the signifiers in the binary of male/female, and are able to define men and masculinity as they know it, their texts fulfill to a large extent the feminist deconstructionists' project. Despite this rupture, however, the Arab women writers discussed here have continued to write of men and masculinity in opposition to women and femininity. This, although reinventing and challenging traditional phallogocentric binary thinking, may be read as reasserting natural and perhaps essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. A feminist reading of the texts may reveal that the writers may only be depicting a version of their reality, where most men are potentially violent and where this violence may only be a product of socialization rather than as innate qualities. However, by depicting most men as violent they may instead be read as reaffirming "natural" differences between men and women. By so strongly insisting that violence is a fundamental part of masculinity, these writers run the risk of establishing binaries that are equally rigid and that may continue to constrain members of both sexes to their gendered norms.

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