



Masculine Identity in Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*

■ Mona Katawi

Graduate student, University of Leipzig

Since masculinity is “historically changing and politically fraught” any attempt at defining it remains deficient and incomplete. As R.W. Connell puts it, masculinities “come into existence at particular times and places, and are always subject to change” (Connell, 3). In Lebanon, the civil war had an enormous impact on the manner masculinity is perceived. The war polarized people according to their gender; the masculine ideal was reflected in courageous men killing and fighting in the name of patriotism, whereas women were frequently associated with passivity. The irrelevance of this opposition is reflected in many Lebanese war novels, where the traditional roles are reversed. (Aghacy, “Domestic Spaces in War Fiction: Entrapment or Liberation”, 83). The absurdity of this division is expressed in Hoda Barakat’s *The Stone of Laughter* through the protagonist Khalil, who refuses to accept the identity that is imposed on him by society. In this novel, one of the major themes Hoda Barakat deals with and criticizes is gender roles in Lebanon at the time of the civil war. As Mona Fayyad succinctly puts it, Barakat’s novel presents the war as a situation “where gender roles are rigidly overdetermined, where participation in the community through fighting is the basic touchstone of masculine identity” (163). Nevertheless, it is clear that in Barakat’s novel the male protagonist is ill-at-ease in an aggressive male role, and consequently, retires into a protected female inner space. (Aghacy, “Introduction: Lebanese Women and Literature”, 13).

Khalil, who lives in an apartment in Beirut at the time of the civil war, adopts feminine traits physically and psychologically. Since the interior sphere, which is usually considered the “feminine” sphere, represents a safe place, Khalil adopts the feminine condition in order to protect himself. He spends his time in his apartment cooking and dreaming. After every battle he busies himself in cleaning up his room:

Whenever a battle draws to an end, Khalil feels the need for order and cleanliness and the feeling grows, spreads until it becomes almost an obsession. After every battle, his room is clean and fresh like new, as if the builders had just left. The tiles shine and the room gives out a smell of soap, of polish, of disinfectant. (Barakat, 9)

Unable to fight the chaos in the streets, he tries to create order indoors in order to preserve this sanctuary that protects him from the violence of the streets.

There are two versions of masculinity that are presented in the novel: the first category is made up of youths “who have broken down the door of conventional masculinity and entered manhood through the wide door of history”, who shape “the destiny of an area of patent importance on the world map”, and the second consists of those of Khalil’s age who “have got a grip on the important things in life” (Barakat, 12). Khalil has no access to these “very attractive versions of masculinity, the force that makes the volcano of life explode”, and thus he remains “alone in his narrow passing place, in a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life” (Barakat, 12). Khalil is reluctant to accept the mark of gender, and thus he finds a refuge from having to make a choice in a pregendered self (Fayyad, 166-167). He recalls the moment when his voice broke, which to him represents the moment which ended “the delight of being outside sex” (Barakat, 142):

When his voice fell and its high wave broke like the glass of a lamp his surprise was so great that it left him no opportunity to realize what it was that he had lost now, forever. His voice became thick, like a thick wound and his green leaves fell from him in a moment, leaving him a large, dry, brown trunk which will carry him as far as language can to the edge of nothingness, to the isthmus of successive extinctions. (Barakat, 142)

Khalil is homosexual, but as Frédéric Lagrange correctly points out, his sexual orientation is just “an element in his reluctance to choose virility” (185). His longing for submission and passivity is also apparent when it comes to his sexuality. He dreams of the men he loves and waits for their visits feverishly, but he never talks about his feelings or takes any kind of action. On one occasion, he even seems to be repelled by sexuality. He sees Zahra, a young woman who was in love with him, walking in the street with a young man she apparently has a relationship with, and he starts watching them. They

remind him of “two pigs who walk, with the revolting secret smells that their vile bodies secrete”, and he laughs at the thought of telling them that “all these blazing embers are extinguished in one, tiny moment in two disgusting little parts of their bodies” (Barakat, 117). Khalil is in love with his neighbor Naji, who gets killed by militiamen. Several months after Naji’s death, he falls in love with Youssef, who also gets killed. Khalil is attracted to their masculinity. Even the bare torsos of dead men fill him with excitement because “those firm, naked bodies confirm to him beyond all doubt that they are men, that the sharp flame of their masculinity is what led them to kill” (Barakat, 144). But when Youssef dies, even this fact becomes questionable. The women who mourn over Youssef’s death refer to his corpse as “she”¹, making the issue of gender seem even more so complicated to Khalil. Even though Khalil strongly resists the mark of gender, he eventually realizes that in order to survive, there has to be a change in his life. The death of both Naji and Youssef affect him deeply. Unable to express his sorrow, he isolates himself and avoids almost all human contact. Khalil also gets severely sick. Unable to eat, he vomits blood and his body gets thin and ugly. He develops an ulcer and he has to be operated on. The time he spends in the hospital is central to Khalil’s transformation. He is fascinated by the hospital’s ambiance and sees it as “the city’s real paradise” because it creates the right atmosphere for forgetting the war (Barakat, 158). The hospital seems to be independent of the world outside: it has its own light, its own air, and the whiteness “washes the brain clean of any images of the blood” (Barakat, 158). The nurses are Thai or Filipino and don’t speak Arabic. Doctor Waddah, who is in charge of Khalil, treats him like a loving mother. This means a lot to Khalil, especially after the operation in which he almost dies, because Dr. Waddah gives him the feeling that he is loved. In addition to the affection Dr. Waddah provides Khalil with, he gives him a new healthy and strong body. Khalil is filled with delight simply because he is alive and healthy again, and decides to “learn a new alphabet with which to love himself, the self he hated so long and abused” (Barakat, 175).

Khalil’s relationship to other people improves and his friend Nayif introduces him to new people, such as a man known as “the Brother”, a warlord who has the power to open one of the doors of manhood for Khalil. He feels attracted to Khalil and wants to help him. On one occasion, he takes Khalil with him to show him how he exchanges drugs for weapons. To protect Khalil, he also gives him a card. When Khalil gets beaten up by some militiamen later that evening, he remembers the card and hands it to the men. Khalil does not know what is written on the card, but we understand that through the card, the militiamen take Khalil to be a lawyer from a group of friends, and thus they apologize and take him home. Through these incidents, Khalil eventually realizes that in order not to be a victim, he has no choice but to become a victimizer.

In the last scene, Khalil is transformed. His transformation does not take place without a process in which Khalil dehumanizes himself and others (Fayad, 165). He is a different person; he wears sunglasses and a leather jacket; he smuggles weapons and rapes a young woman who lives above him even though he initially took care of her. As Frédéric Lagrange correctly asserts, “it should be stressed that Khalil does not ‘become straight’ in the last scene” since “the end of hesitation is also the end of ‘passive’ sexuality: whether it be heterosexual or homosexual” (185).

Khalil’s transformation is illusory, as the title of the novel suggests. The “Stone of Laughter” refers to the philosopher’s stone, which, in alchemy, is a stone or chemical substance thought to have the power of transmuting baser metals into gold (Fayad, 165). As the gold that is sought by the alchemists, Khalil’s new identity hardly resembles his former identity. The narrator does not condemn Khalil nor tries to justify his acts. As Rashid al-Daif puts it, the realism in Barakat’s novel is neutral; she merely wants to expose man. It is as if Barakat were trying to say: “That’s the way life is” (Al-Daif, 62). Nevertheless, the moral standards are criticized in this novel, and Khalil’s transformation is not presented as something desirable. Khalil, whom we loved at the beginning, becomes a violent monster we fail to sympathize with.

END NOTES

1. The Arabic word for corpse is feminine.

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