

The Lesbian Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic Literature:

'An Absent Presence' Disciplined by the Gaze

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The subject of lesbianism is rarely addressed in contemporary Arabic literature, without inciting prejudice, denial, or repetition of some preconceived ideas about the widely used term, "homosexuality". Even after the emergence of Arab feminism, 'lesbian subjectivity' is totally silenced on the assumption that sexuality is not a 'priority' in a male-oriented world in which 'women' have more vital concerns to fight for than what is seen as 'bodily rights', or rights to 'pleasure'. Some authors presume that there are no lesbians in Arab cultures. Others claim that some women 'become' lesbians due to negative experiences or imposed sexual segregation. Set within the limits of female bonding in heterosexual norms, most Arab writings about intimate same-sex relations among females tend to convey an implicit message that lesbians are women who can be heteronormalized once their circumstances change. All these assumptions and misconceptions regulate the public opinion and subdue any attempt to assert an independent lesbian subjectivity that has different priorities, ethics, rights, and politics.

Subjectivity and freedom to assert one's individuality are essential concepts of any philosophy. To this day, lesbian philosophy remains a Euro-American and feminist one that is rarely approached by Arab scholars. Though lesbian philosophy is still restricted to thought and theories by Western feminist thinkers, it provides me with several theoretical tools to analyze the operation of meaning-making in Arab narratives that use the discourse of deviance and abnormality as a means of consolidating the heterosexualized meanings of subjectivity. While delving into the emergence of lesbian literature and philosophy in Western cultures, I increasingly realized that the status of the lesbian as an independent subjectivity in Arab cultures is more problematic than the Western ones that theorized the concepts of 'gender', 'lesbian', and 'queer' in a manner that is still regarded as alien to Arab values.

According to Lillian Faderman (1981), " 'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other... By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other" (pp. 17-18). Such a definition, if applied to female same-sex relations in the normalized homosocial closets of Arab cultures, might make all types of female bonding appear to be lesbian. Nevertheless, I find many of the definitions that are available in Western lesbian studies to be of central importance to my analysis of the

concept of the lesbian subjectivity as an abstract priori and intuitive core that precedes intentionality, signification, literary representation, and self-identification.

One of the most difficult tasks confronting lesbians in the Arab region is inscribing themselves/ourselves as speaking subjects. In the narratives of Arab writers, the lesbian dissolves in the realm of fiction as a fuzzy and illusory figure. Such a portrayal makes it almost impossible for any lesbian to express one's peculiar and most intimate feelings to the outside world. Deprived of the means of self-expression in the system of meaning, excluded from discourse and confined in it at the same time, how can a lesbian subjectivity become a speaking subject?

Within the Arab symbolic logic, the female body is produced and re-produced as a heterosexual object for the public gaze. Hence, when Arab authors discussed 'female homosexuality', they did that through what I call "the heterosexual gaze". In other words, they saw all females through eyes and glasses that serve the interests of typical male-oriented structures. In this paper, I focus on the power of "the heterosexual gaze" from a lesbian perspective that recognizes the discrete layers of oppression that face signification and self-assertion. The principal focus of this paper is on the literary representations of lesbianism and the lens through which the lesbian is depicted. I show how same-sex intimacies in contemporary Arabic narratives are shaped in accordance with the dominant heterosexual expectations. The lesbian, as represented in such narratives, becomes a woman who might be able to 'surpass the love of men', but cannot surpass the power of their heterosexual gaze. I try in this article to propose new ways of approaching the 'absent presence of the lesbian subjectivity' by deconstructing the available diagnosis of female same-sex relations in contemporary Arabic literature.

Despite the necessity of writing about lesbian issues, the paper demonstrates the complexities inherent in giving voice to lesbian experiences by non-lesbian authors. According to Bonnie Zimmerman's definition, contemporary lesbian fiction must be written by self-declared lesbians, because "the nature of lesbian fiction makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it" (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 52). The lesbian novel places "love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of the story" (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 15). Zimmerman's definition reveals the absence of lesbian literature in Arabic, especially when one can hardly find an Arab female writer "who declares herself to be a lesbian" (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 15).

Seen in the above light, the lesbian novel does not exist in Arabic literature. Though 'lesbian literature' in Arabic has no officially recorded history, the topic of lesbianism recently emerged as part of the literature on women. Most of the writings about lesbianism reflect a concern with the lesbian as a "pure physicality", not as "the carrier of self/identity". The emergence of Arabic literature on 'female homosexuality' during the past few years constitutes a leap in sexuality studies. However, most of the works written about female same-sex relations seem to be motivated by a tendency to stigmatize lesbianism or to portray it as a radical feminist tool for women's liberation. By confining same-sex practices to an obscure private sphere, Arabic literature exposes the lesbian to a heterosexist and male-oriented gaze that makes it difficult for her to become visible, public, and comprehensible. In Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female*

Homosexuality and Modern Culture (1993), “the lesbian is a spectral figure... she appears as something incidental, impalpable, fleeting, or obscured, not as something solidly in the world” (as cited in Hesford, 2005, p. 228). Hence, analyzing the unrecognized position of the lesbian in Arabic literature requires a thorough analysis of some literary texts that reveal the link between the intimate and the social on the one hand and the enduring and pervasive nature of the hegemonic heterosexual gaze on the other hand. In *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), Farwell repeats the words of “Judith Roof and Elizabeth Meese [who] ask whether it is possible to narrate lesbian in a plot system which is already overdetermined as male and heterosexual” (p. 9).

Despite the “death of the author” in the twentieth century, the meanings given by Arab authors remain historically and socially determined. Even when the role of the author disappears as a producer of truth in Foucault’s “What is an author?”, Arab authors still play a role in recycling conventional ideology through a cautionary narrative that “is governed by paradigms and codes that are not innocent” (Faderman, 1981, p. 15). Hence, it is important to show how the discourses of lesbian sexuality are negotiated and contested through the production of particular interpretative literary works which are key parts in the construction of the collective discourse about lesbianism as a “sexual deviance”, “social disease”, and “sinful practice” in contemporary Arabic literature.

A closer look at one of the so-called “censored poems” of Nizar Qabbani, renowned as “the poet of love”, reflects the power of the male heterosexual gaze to penetrate a discrete place. In “The Evil Poem”, Qabbani is praised by many Arab critics as being worthy of his nickname “the evil boy”, for “invading the harem and defying sexual taboos” (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, pp. 113-114). By describing an eroticized encounter between two female lovers on a rainy night; a lustful encounter that nobody witnesses but the “I” of the poem and the “lamplight”, the poet asserts the powerful role of the author, not only as the one who sees what takes place in the dark, but also the one who knows the subjective feelings of lesbian lovers. The two female bodies are eroticized in “a dialogue between four breasts, sucking wolves, birds, nails, hair, nipples, silky heaps...” (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, pp. 114-118). Qabbani’s voyeuristic attitude towards the encounter between two female bodies asserts the omnipresent male-oriented perspective that has the power to unlock the closed door of the fantasized “harem” and to liberate it in his own words, or to close it and to control it whenever he wants, for he seems to be the owner of the ‘key’ that allows him to enter any space at any time. In other words, he can be the jailor and the liberator at the same time. Hence, Qabbani’s use of sex is “as little more than a tattered cover for the affirmation of male power, imposing a male-oriented ‘sexual liberation’ on women” (Weeks, 1995, p. 35).

The concentration on the feminine contours of the female body, and the maternal image of suckling put the poet in the position of the desiring male who looks at this scene while fantasizing his place in it. Female lovers appear as silent hostages in a fantasized harem. They are turned into fetishistic love objects for voyeuristic male audience/readers via a phallic gaze that imposes a new form of heterosexual regulation and control of lesbian love. Using a male tongue to give voice to an imagined feminine jouissance, “an ‘instinctual economy’ that cannot be identified by a man” (Cixous, 1986, p. 88), the poem becomes a phallic narrative of the most intimate and

inexpressible feelings between two female lovers. The gaze of the author is so profound that the lesbian body becomes the object of desire to a wider penetrative heterosexual gaze. At the end of the poem, the male narrator becomes impatient with the process of love-making that does not lead to penetration. Therefore, the phallic voice of the male narrator intervenes and demands in an orderly manner: "Tear off the silk/ye lover of silk" (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, p. 118). It is worth noting that silk exists in the "erotic imagination as a feminine source of pleasure, genital erection and female orgasm" (Rosario, 1997, p. 113). In this context, the poet appears as a director of a scene that fulfills the phallogocentric identification of a desiring heterosexual gaze.

Obviously, the relationship between the male poet and the two female lovers is portrayed in a manner that asserts the desiring position of the poet as the one who sucks their breasts. By comparing them to "she-wolves" suckling each other, the poet "produces a hallucinatory metaphor. There is fear and fascination" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45); fear of the female body and fascination with maternal love. Hence, the male poet becomes the "representative of the paternal function [who] takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45). Unlike typical patriarchal cultures that exclude the feminine, Qabbani does not exclude the maternal; rather he successfully integrates the maternal body in the construction of his own patriarchy, as much as he integrates lesbianism in the assertion of heterosexuality. In such a discourse, lesbianism is equated with womanhood, femininity, and self-regulating heteronormative assumptions associated with the female body. The male author becomes the one who does not only know what women want, but what lesbian lovers want.

Similarly, Nihad Seeras' *Halett Shagaff* (i.e. *A Case of Passion*, 1998) depicts all-women's parties in Aleppo as wild ones in which women get involved in obscene affairs. Details about women kissing, dancing, rubbing and scrubbing the bodies of each other from underneath the covers are narrated by a male peeper. The female dancer is perceived as a potential heterosexual love object for a male viewer and narrator. Even when the male narrator is told that the dancer is "lesbian", he continues to pursue her, disregarding her lesbian sexuality which does not seem to make any sense to him. Within the system of meaning in which the female body is bound up with heteronormative assumptions, the lesbian "riddle" is typically fantasized as an excessively erotic body, and is made visible by an omnipresent male viewer who reproduces it as a source of pleasure to heterosexual viewers.

The portrayal of lesbianism as an "obscene practice" that results from an oppressive past is repeated in Ammar Abdulhamid's *Menstruation* (2001). By attributing lesbian sex to the suppression of heterosexual desires and the separation of the sexes in fundamentalist societies, the lesbian subject is projected to the public gaze as a heterosexually oppressed woman. All women in the novel are seen as willing to be engaged in "group sex" with each other, even when they have no feeling of love or commitment to one another. Batul, the woman who is defined as being "lesbian" is depicted as a bizarre sex worker who admits to making love on a daily basis to many women of all types; "married, single, traditional, liberal, and all of them very normal, and not necessarily unhappy with their lives" (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 101). Women's obsession with sex is attributed to "the ideologically repressive nature of their societies" (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 154). The author's assumption that lesbian sexuality

is imposed not chosen establishes lesbianism in the collective consciousness as an outcome of a conservative social structure that forbids women enough access to men.

However, since the so-called oppressed women of the novel manage to invite an inexperienced young man to have sex with, it becomes hard to understand the writer's assumption that "the religious condemnation of non-marital sex" is the major cause of homosexuality in "the fundamentalist-conservative society" (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 149). When the narrator imposes a sense of guilt on homoerotic practices among women, the writer does not only stigmatize female same-sex relations; he also creates a prohibitive discourse that might make many lesbians internalize the imposed sense of guilt and shame. This kind of discourse constructs the lesbian in the collective public gaze as a mere example of "repression" in a conservative religious framework. According to Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), "social and psychic realities are connected in such a way that the social structure of discourse determines the character of interior psychic space" (as cited in Magnus, 2006, p. 84). In such a context, the lesbian subjectivity is reduced to a shameful and immoral effect of the subordinating social and political circumstances in a society in which "morality was little more than a tool of political oppression" (as cited in Magnus, 2006, p. 93).

In women's writings about lesbian issues, the lesbian sexuality is similarly perceived as the outcome of the heterosexual oppression of women in traditional socio-political contexts. Despite the limitations and restrictions imposed on women's writings about women, some women writers managed to provide an understanding of the ways in which society works to disadvantage women. However, none of these writings reveal enough sensitivity towards lesbian lovers. The discourse of female homosexuality was introduced to give an impression that "lesbianism is imposed on women" in a patriarchal society. Instead of providing positive lesbian images that can give authority to the multiple demands and needs of lesbians, lesbians were merely used by heterosexual women authors to legitimize the demands of heterosexual women.

Despite the fact that the novel by Saudi author Siba Al-Harz's *The Others* (2006) appears to be written about lesbians, the writer does not identify herself as a lesbian author. Instead she regards the lesbian practice as imposed on the members of her sex due to sexual segregation in a religious society. Her use of a pseudonym to tell stories about female same-sex relations stigmatizes lesbianism. The novel deals with the struggle of a young Saudi woman in the context of a religious fundamentalist background. Having sado-masochistic relations with women, feeling disgusted with women, and breaking the hearts of many, including her own heart, are shown as representatives of her ways of breaking away from social values and traditions. Her first and only heterosexual relationship takes place with a Lebanese man she used to chat with on the Internet – her "virtual homeland" (Al-Harz, 2006, p. 226). Heterosexual love is portrayed as the most desired end; an end that matches the socio-sexual expectations of her sex. The protagonist confesses that despite the fact that she has homosexual relations, she refuses to define herself as "lesbian". Her erotic relations with women are for her "an expression of a lustful desire for a man who will not come" (Al-Harz, 2006, p. 179). Hence, her longing to offer her virginity to a male lover ("Take it! I don't want it! Take it!") establishes lesbian sex as a socio-political need for protecting heterosexual women from losing their virginites (Al-Harz, 2006,

p. 285). Keen on abiding by the rules that pertain to preserving her chastity till the day of marriage, Al-Harz's female protagonist underestimates her affairs with women as "meaningless".

In some Arab women writings, the lesbian is subjected to a feminist compassionate gaze that seems to be provoked by the desire to reunite women through lesbian love. In Elham Mansour's novel *Ana Heya Anti* (i.e. I Am You, 2000), Irigaray's extended metaphor of the "two lips speaking together" as opposed to the singular, rigid, and phallic standard that characterizes masculinity is recalled in the title of the novel. In Irigaray's words:

You/I: we are several at once..., [but] you/I become two, then, for their pleasure. But thus divided into two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me. Outside, you try to conform to an alien order. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. (as cited in Price, 1999, pp. 85-86)

In Mansour's text, the lesbian body is portrayed as an exiled feminine body that pre-exists the separation between the "you" and the "I". Lesbian love is seen as a narcissistic attempt to return to the first maternal body which is exemplified in the unique sensations that engulf Seham when she recalls the touches of her mother. As Ruth Vanita (1996) observes, this model of the mother-daughter relationship "anticipates Freud's insight that the mother is the first love object for all babies implicitly, then, love for a woman is the primary experience of all women" (p. 12).

The feminine body language that is used by Irigaray in re-creating the mother-child dyad is repeated by Seham the lesbian protagonist. The bodily discourse of Seham is encountered by the psychological discourse of her teacher Layal who treats her lesbian student as a psychological case worthy of investigation. Seen in this light, the lesbian is subjected to the gaze of the teacher and the mother who find female same-sex attraction as "natural" among girls at a certain phase, "but that would become pathological if it persists" as the female teacher says to her student (Mansour, 2000, p. 28). Apparently, even when the act of looking takes place by a female author, lesbianism continues to be seen as a form of perversion or narcissism.

In Mansour's novel, the sexual relation between women and the only self-declared lesbian character is treated as an encounter between vaginal bodies and a clitoral/phallic body. The problem with this discourse is that it can turn the lesbian body into "a pseudo male", and a "phallic" body that replaces the male during times of sexual deprivation. Appearing as a "butch" makes the lesbian appear as a phallic body that is attractive to heterosexually deprived women. Many women in the novel regard the lesbian as a potential love-maker that replaces their absent men during the Lebanese civil war. The novel establishes lesbianism in the public fantasy as a safe haven for all women during the absence of men. Despite the fact that the lesbian butch affirms that femininity is not attached to an outfit, she continues to be seen as a phallic body that fulfills a heterosexual need for "fuck" (Mansour, 2000, p. 166). Adopting the Freudian psycho-analytical discourse, Mansour's lesbian protagonist Seham is portrayed as "a true invert" who has never been attracted to men (Mansour, 2000, p. 75), but who is constantly subjected to a hetero-normalizing gaze and heterosexual expectations.

In most literary works written about lesbian issues, lesbian sexuality is perceived as a mere experience, and a sign of sexual oppression. In Samar Yazbek's *Raehatul Kirfa* (i.e. The Smell of Cinnamon, 2008), the author uses the Damascene culture as a means of asserting stereotypes, and repeating some pre-conceived ideas about female same-sex relations. In a sub-cultural context, the concept of *banat al 'ishra* (or girls of co-habitation in Arabic) was most probably used in Damascus during the thirties to refer to upper middle class single females who refuse to marry men and live with other females in a strong and intimate connection. The concept of *banat al 'ishra* exists in the collective memory of some old Damascenes as a euphemistic reference to "lesbians"; a neutral expression that is free of the heterosexual suggestions implied by the word "woman". However, Yazbek uproots the potential "lesbian code" of *banat al 'ishra* from its sub-cultural context and linguistic specificity and places it in a different era. According to Yazbek (2008),

the majority of '*banat al 'ishra*' are mainly married, and each one has a girlfriend or inamorata, and most of them get married early, and few people know about them, for their meetings are allocated to women only, and men feel assured when their wives are with other women, even if they feel that there is something suspicious in that friendship. The engagement remains acceptable if the woman's affair remains secret. As soon as gossips begin, the husband breaks the affair between his wife and her girlfriend. (p. 97)

By turning single females who have loving relations exclusively with other females into wives who come from various social and sectarian backgrounds, the writer subverts the oral Damascene culture and incites a different official memory that totally excludes any possibility for a lesbian to identify herself as *bint al 'ishra*. Yazbek's women are united through their marital relations with influential men, not by mutual love or co-habitation, let alone the fact that Yazbek's women are not *banat* (or girls) on the basis that they are married to men. Placing men at the center of lesbian sex, Yazbek's discourse alienates lesbians from a distinguished local expression, and makes it difficult for lesbians to find refuge in the past. The unofficial voices of *banat al 'ishra* are silenced by an official heterosexual discourse that turns them from independent females into dependent heterosexual women. Thus, by heterosexualizing the coined term of *banat al 'ishra*, the lesbians of the past who might have had some roots in the oral culture are deprived of the vocabulary and the linguistic tool that could enable lesbians in the present to constitute themselves/ourselves as speaking subjects, without feeling totally estranged from language and culture.

In Hala El-Badry's *A Certain Woman* (2003), lesbianism seems to be something unheard of by the women of the novel who deny it both physically and spiritually. One of her female characters compares a relationship with a woman to a relationship with an impotent man. By treating lesbianism as an impaired heterosexuality and a result of male impotence, desire is established as essentially heterosexual and penetrative. By the end of the novel, Nahid discovers for the first time that she never knew women or got close to any woman's body. She "strongly resented gatherings of women only because they reminded her of mandatory segregation which she totally rejected" (El-Badry, 2003, p. 195). Women's alienation from women's bodies can be attributed to the fact that women's private and public lives seem to be shaped by men's laws and values. By referring to the

imposed policy of silence, isolation and segregation, El-Badry's novel makes an adequate connection between the inhibition that surrounds women's sexual lives and the inhibition that locks people's tongues in the political domain. The social life of people is historically surrounded by fear of "informers and spies", a fear that creates a sort of a deathly silence and divides people by feelings of hatred and suspicion (see Al-Ghafari Review, H-Gender-MidEast, 2006). Nevertheless, this tendency to politicize female solidarity and intimacy might turn the lesbian into a chosen feminist tool that can be invested by heterosexual women during the absence of potent men.

The emergence of the lesbian character in women's literature is often weakened by discussions about the need to subordinate inter-cultural and sectarian differences for the sake of establishing a hegemonic national identity. In Kolette Al-Khoury's *Ayam ma'al Ayam* (i.e. Days with the Days, 2004), the female author narrates her experience as a revolutionary journalist after "the ominous war of June 1967" (p. 23). In a post-war era, manhood, masculinity, and nationalism appear as arbitrary and inseparable terms, whereas lesbian sexuality is treated as alien to one's national commitment to one's country, and as "an unconscious reaction against the absence of real men" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). In this novel, the hetero-nationalized gaze is used as means of silencing lesbian voices. Lesbianism is treated as a phase that is similar to the political phase that "bent the heads of men" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207) after the Arab-Israeli War in June 1967 which is referred to as "nakset huzayran" in Syria, or "the June Setback" in Arab political contexts. It is related to the men's loss of war and their failure in the political domain. This association turns lesbianism into an experience that is attributed to the non-existence of "true men" who can defend the land.

The application of a hetero-nationalistic discourse turns lesbianism into a phase that symbolizes the social and political disappointments of the era, and asserts the typical association between the masculinity of men in the political domain and their heterosexuality in the private sphere. The lesbian relation is described as a sign that symbolizes the defeat of men who "could not shoulder their responsibility" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). It is also exposed as a temporary experience that should not last. When Faten confesses to Suha that she had a love story of a different kind; an affair with a woman, Suha, who is the mouthpiece of the narrator, is shocked, exposing an unjustified homophobic reaction to the lesbian voice. When Suha was asked to provide her opinion regarding Faten's affair with a woman, the narrator was incapable of providing any support. Rather, she felt inclined to "carry a lantern in the daylight to look for a man" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). This reaction silences Faten and forces her to promise not to repeat that experience: "I don't think I'll repeat it, though I can't but say it had been a terrific experience... a frightening one" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 206). The narrator's interpretation of the lesbian affair forces Faten to finally admit that her going out with a woman could have been an unconscious reaction to that feeling (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). In several instances in the novel, love is seen from a heterosexual light as "that natural relationship between a man and a woman" (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 122). The assertion of the naturalness of heterosexual relations is repeated several times in a manner that denies the possibility of asserting other natural kinds of love and relationships in a positive manner.

In Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Misk Al-Ghazal* (i.e. The Musk of the Gazelle, 1996), the traditional homophobic gaze in gender segregated cultures is replaced by a homophobic gaze. Even

though the novel repeats the inherited idea which claims lesbianism to be an outcome of a conservative social structure in which opposite-sex relations are controlled, the narrator adopts an arbitrary homophobic ideology to defend her privileged Lebanese character against the “charge” of lesbianism. Though it is common for women in female-segregated communities to dance together, dancing women in this novel are exposed to the homophobic gaze of the Lebanese narrator who finds the sight of two women dancing together “weird” and “unnatural” (Al-Shaykh, 1996, p. 47). By making an association between the “lesbian bar” in Berlin which is referred to as “the bar of deviant women in Berlin” (Al-Shaykh, 1996, p. 62) and all-women’s parties in the Saudi culture, the Lebanese character unites a Western sub-culture with an Eastern sub-culture by a globalized homophobic gaze that seems rather awkward when applied to a closeted culture that tolerates women dancing together more than men and women doing the same. Her moral judgment of the dancing women, which imposes a series of expectations and meanings on women’s gatherings, is detached from the various emotions of the women themselves and the meaning of their dance in their local cultures. When all scenes of women dancing together are described by the gaze of the narrator as “deviant”, female intimacies in general and lesbian ones in particular are projected to a wider homophobic gaze as equally deviant. Eventually, in equating lesbianism with deviance, the narrator inserts a regulating discourse that forces lesbians to internalize the stigma and see themselves through the eyes of their disgusted beholder.

In Salwa Al-Nuaimi’s *Burhan al-‘Asal* (i.e. Evidence of Honey, 2007), lesbianism is seen by one of the female characters as “an experiment [that each woman] must go through, at least once in a lifetime, just for the sake of exploration” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 85). This experimental discourse is rejected by Nuaimi’s protagonist who describes herself as innately heterosexual. She could not return the flirtations of the woman who kept on pursuing her for years, as much as she could not enjoy being rubbed by a woman, because her mind was filled with heterosexual reflections that could not be gratified by a female rubber. The experience of being rubbed at the hands of a woman does not give vent to a heterosexual woman’s fantasies. According to the heterosexual protagonist, “[h]ad the masseuse been a man massaging her, [her hetero-erotic fantasies] would have made her blood boil” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 86). Aware of the historical meanings associated with the act of rubbing, the female protagonist acknowledges that she is not “lesbian by instinct” (Al-Nuaimi 2007, p. 86), and the fact that she was rubbed by a woman for thirty minutes might make her “‘suhageyya’¹ for thirty minutes” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 86).

In Al-Nuaimi’s text, the physical act of a woman “rubbing” another woman is deconstructed as not necessarily lesbian because its meaning differs according to the woman’s inner desires and fantasies towards the sex of the one who performs the act of rubbing. The author suggests that if the rubbing act is performed by a male masseur in the bath, she would enjoy it in a heterosexual manner. In this context, the self-assertive heterosexual narrator reveals a subtle fear of the potential presence of a desiring lesbian gaze that might frame her as lesbian, because she is being rubbed by a masseuse. Therefore, she asserts that she is not lesbian, because she desires men and she prefers to be rubbed by a man. By diverting the attention from the physical act of rubbing to the implicit desire of the woman who is being rubbed and her feelings towards the sex of the rubber, the author deconstructs the traditional gaze that judges desire on the basis of the performed acts. By doing that, she also reveals a conscious awareness of the potential

1. *Suhageyya*: is the Arabic dictionary word for lesbian.

presence of a lesbian gaze that might be incorporated within the sensations of the masseuse herself to whom she remains sexually detached. Her focus on the unseen desire reduces the significance of the visible act of rubbing and the temporary experience. It also subdues the power of the gaze as an identity-maker. However, her fear of the act of being rubbed by a masseuse that might frame her as “lesbian” makes her adopt a self-defensive heterosexual discourse that exposes the innateness of heterosexuality for a heterosexual woman and the necessity of categorizing the heterosexual desire as an emotional, mental and erotic love for men. This essentialized heterosexual discourse shows the need for a counter self-affirmative lesbian discourse that asserts the innateness of the lesbian desire for many lesbians and the necessity of transcending the rubbing act as a means of defining subjectivities.

In *Bareed Mista3jil* (i.e. Urgent Mail, 2009) which is supposed to be “a collection of true stories by non-heterosexual women living in Lebanon”, one of the anonymous lesbian speakers rejects the act of “*sou7aq*” as a means of self-expression. Though she names herself “*sou7aqiyyah*”, she expresses her confusion at the contradictory connotations of the Arabic label “*suhaq*” that is “supposed to denote sexual acts between two women in the form of ‘grinding/rubbing... [when]... the verb also means to crush” (Sou7aqiyyeh, 2009, p. 35). Hence, she mockingly inquires: “How in the world is the verb ‘to crush’ supposed to signify anything related to a woman loving or making love to another woman?” (Sou7aqiyyeh, 2009, pp. 35–36). Seen as an improper means of identity formation, the physical act of “rubbing/grinding” that had been historicized as a lesbian one is rejected. The speaker in *Sou7aqiyyeh* rejects both the Arabic label and its multiple associations with the acts of “grinding”, “rubbing”, and “crushing”. Instead of de-stigmatizing the label, the speaker exiles herself from language. The fact that the text is written in English can be seen as an attempt to come out of the closets of Arabic language and culture. Refusing to see herself through the eyes of her beholders, the modern lesbian speaker rejects the Arabic label as a socio-political means of visibility. Instead of liberating the Arabic label from the confining power of the gaze, the Arabic label is re-asserted as an offensive marker of self-definition, disregarding the fact that any other label can be similarly stigmatized or abused by the hegemonic discourse of meaning-makers in any other culture or language.

Although the newly emerging lesbian voices in *Bareed Mista3jil* exemplify a break from the past, the fact that the “queer” speakers appear as nameless voices coming out of nowhere makes it difficult to find a way to re-invent language, to re-name desire, and to name the nameless subjectivity. Such a disguised “coming out” might make lesbians internalize the globalized homophobia; it might also lead to reinforcement of the politics of invisibility as a cultural norm and political necessity. *Bareed Mista3jil* can be read as a collective plea for understanding the feelings and dilemmas of many modern lesbians. However, this collectively anonymous discourse embodies a new split between the lesbian body and the voice. Even while obtaining the power of articulation, the lesbian body as a physical presence remains powerless. Despite the fact that this text can be seen as an attempt to “kill” the Arab author in order to enable lesbian voices to exist, it cannot be seen as a lesbian text because its authors are anonymous. According to Roland Barthes (1967), “once the author is discovered, the text is ‘explained’” (p. 5). Because the lesbian author is not discovered as a living person, the lesbian text remains unexplained. By preventing the lesbian authors

from appearing as real and tangible beings, *Bareed Mista3jil* did not only kill its own authors; it also buried the lesbian voices in an apparently virtual space.

Clearly, most of the Arabic narratives establish lesbian desire as a “taboo pleasure” and “forbidden sin” that is akin to prostitution. Despite the fact that lesbian sexuality is rarely mentioned in religious books or considered to be a sin, there is a tendency among modern male writers to establish it as being a “sinful practice” that is pursued by sexually frustrated wives and suppressed heterosexual women. Lesbian images in female-authored texts are as negative and disempowering as they are in male-authored texts. In women’s writings about lesbians, one encounters sexually obsessed figures, erotic bodies, cruel creatures, oppressed wives, psychologically disturbed women, or angry freaks. Such representations of lesbians in women’s texts are not meant to give voice to a lesbian subjectivity, as much as they seem to be directed towards doubling the stigma or incorporating it in a so-called “feminist cause” which mainly revolves around the presumed needs/desires of heterosexual women. Hence, the lesbian is not only the desired other to male writers; she is also the desired and abused other to many women writers.

In examining several available discourses about lesbian relations, I became aware that Arabic literature plays a major role in structuring the dominant system of values in a manner that would make readers in general and lesbian ones in particular internalize the cultural implications contained in language. Contemporary Arabic literature about lesbian issues does not contain any interrogation of womanhood as a cultural or political construct, but uses the “woman” as a means of referring to any lesbian subjectivity, leaving no chance for lesbians to assert their own differences from other women and among themselves/ourselves. Rather, the image of the lesbian is distorted, heterosexualized, and politicized by several Arab writers to promote what they see as a need for liberating women. The dominant discourse in contemporary Arabic literature gives an impression that once heterosexual freedom is given to women, “homosexuality” will fade away. The logic of a lesbian selfhood as being innately different from womanhood does not exist in the collective symbolic order. Hence, the lesbian “I” cannot assert her unique subjectivity or become a speaking self without confronting the constraining discourse and the heterosexual gaze that treats her as a “woman”, with all the heterosexual implications associated with womanhood. As Monique Wittig argues, “Lesbian is the only concept that I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically or ideologically” (as cited in Shaktini, 2005, p. 69).

Because the imagined homosexual practices in Arab cultures have historically been subsumed within a seemingly tolerant homosocial order that does not defy the heterosexual institution of marriage, lesbianism came to be defined in accordance with the fantasized acts in the heterosexual and homosocial closets. Apparently, contemporary Arabic literature does not make enough distinction between outing the fantasized homosexual acts to the public gaze and outing the single lesbian subjectivity as an authentic core that seeks recognition on the one hand, and as an unacknowledged selfhood that transcends both the heterosexual gaze and all its closets on the other hand. Henceforth, Joseph Massad’s (2007) anti-Western discourse in *Desiring Arabs* which equates between “outing the closet” and the “colonial

propaganda” of “the Gay International” (pp. 375-376) creates a paradoxical situation for the voiceless subjectivities. Massad’s denial of the need for identity politics in Arab contexts might lead to hetero-normalizing the subdued lesbian subjectivity as relational, provisional, meaningless, anti-Arab, and Westernized, before she even aspires to become a speaking subject.

Clearly, contemporary Arabic literature does not distinguish between “compulsory homosexuality” and lesbian subjectivities. Rather, it presents female same-sex relations in an illusive and non-sympathetic manner that over-stigmatizes lesbian self-assertion. Many male and female writers treat the female body as a dependent heterosexual construct that shares a common desire and that has no independent will or autonomy. Such an oppressive image sustains the stereotypical female sense of inferiority and helplessness. Men’s writings about “women” and women’s writings about “other females” play a role in combining the existing heterophobic gaze that surrounds opposite sex relations with a new homophobic one surrounding same-sex relations. While most Arab women’s writings on lesbian issues offer no liberating perceptions of lesbianism, they show the need to add a new gender-sensitive dimension to women’s studies and Arab feminism. Consequently, what is needed is the autobiographical form of lesbian storytelling by self-declared lesbians. Autobiography is indeed “the final guarantee that what we read is true account” (Morris, 1993, p. 64).

Thus, asserting the autonomous lesbian subjectivity as a speaking subject requires surpassing the domineering heterosexual gaze which is accompanied in certain instances with a nationalistic gaze that invents and re-invents lesbians in accordance with heterosexual norms of sex, romance, womanhood, and nationhood. In order to give voice to a more concrete and empowering concept of the lesbian subjectivity, lesbians need to be liberated from the repetitive scripts written about them/us and the opportunistic politics of gender segregation that might risk locking the peculiar self in a feminist harem in which lesbians are neither given the right to “be different” nor “be equal”. Obviously, asserting the lesbian “I” is an exhausting lifelong process because it entails confronting all systems: historical, social, sexual, religious, linguistic, and political.

Clearly, the independent lesbian subjectivity that constantly defies the heterosexual gaze and surpasses its expectations remains absent from the hegemonic gaze of the Arabic narrative that disciplines, abuses, misinterprets, or manipulates the female body. Consequently, “the lesbian body... as a spiritual body that exists prior to the material practice of sex, as a sensual body that speaks a different body language, as a mental body that has its own ethics, and as a virgin autonomous body” (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 165) is not perceived by the dominant ways of looking. Hence, the “lesbian as an infinite sensual, mental, spiritual, and sexual awareness that is incarnated in a female body” is still unintelligible to the hegemonic hetero-normalizing gaze (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 145). The lesbian subjectivity as a genuine and intuitive core that pre-exists experience, intentionality, and the spoken word, and as “a tenacious lesbian soul that steadily defends its lesbian specificity throughout her entire life” (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 145) does not seem to be recognized by most Arab authors. Using Butler’s (1990) “epistemological paradigm” that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed” (p. 142), it becomes obvious that the lesbian subjectivity does not seem to have a recognizable position in Arabic literature, because there is a decisive intention to regard lesbianism as an accidental deed without an

intentional doer, or reduce it to a meaningless act of an oppressed doer. The issue at stake is how can a self-defined lesbian assert one's subjectivity, when both the "deed" and the "doer" are entangled within the limiting heterosexual codes of intelligibility?

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