

Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature

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This essay explores the various representations of male homosexuality in contemporary Arabic fiction and, in light of its pervasiveness in classical Arabic cultural production, also addresses the issue of why the subject has become relatively obscured in recent times.¹ This necessarily limited perspective is conceived as a contribution to a wider discussion of the evolution of different concepts that could be grouped under the single label of 'homosexuality' in Arab societies, to form part of a sociology of Arab homosexualities that is still badly needed.² Looking at the representation of social relations and intimacy in cultural production is certainly one of the easiest steps in this endeavour, for we should hope to find in it both an echo of some Arab societies' views on male-male relationships, and an indication of the ways in which conceptions are evolving.

To what extent is modern literature qualified to inform us on the construction of male identity and the sexual customs and taboos attached to it in contemporary Arab societies? If we were to ask such a question of classical Arabo-Islamic cultural production, answers should be sought both in writings pertaining to the religious domain, that inform on the *nomos* and obliquely on the frequency of its transgression, and in what was termed *adab*, the cultural baggage of the learned man. In classical *adab*, artistic prose and pleasant verses dealing with frivolous or serious matters help define the sexual ethics of the multi-faceted *Homo Islamicus*. As for the modern period, sociology, journalism or even direct and personal experience should help us. But for reasons that have to be analysed, not only are the margins of the sexual ethic, such as homosexuality, severely underdocumented in sociological essays, hushed or harshly attacked in the

press, but literature itself proves much less eager to discuss pleasure in all its manifestations than it did until the first half of the nineteenth century. While in the last decade 'gender studies' has started to enter the field of Islamic studies on the ethics of sexuality and eroticism,³ hasty psychoanalytic studies of Arab societies have flourished,⁴ particularly among French-speaking Maghriban writers, and these occasionally deal with homosexuality.⁵ One of the most troubling flaws of works aiming to analyse Arab attitudes toward love is the portrayal of the Arab Muslim man as an unchanging monad, unaffected by time and place, unaltered from sixth-century Hijaz to twentieth-century Morocco or Iraq.

The mere fact that there are scarce mentions of homosexuality in contemporary literature, when compared with classical poetry or *adab* literature, could be interpreted in itself as an indication of huge transformations in Arab men's relations with their bodies and desires. This is not to say that homoeroticism or themes connected to gender confusion have disappeared from the public scene in the twentieth century: the Egyptian commercial cinema, as well as present-day farcical plays, have always relied on transvestism as a comic tool, while discreet homosexual allusions have often been in evidence.⁶ As for the artistically more ambitious films of Youssef Chahine⁷ or Yusri Nasrallah,⁸ they are filled with homoerotic winks. Coarser allusions were to be found in turn-of-the-century vaudeville plays or Qaragoz spectacles, as Egyptian society retailed some of its pre-modern tolerance for homosexuality. This is shown in the 78 rpm records of Ahmad Fahim al-Far ('the Rat'), a comedian who sold many discs, among which one finds items such as *Khenaqat el-khawal ma'a l-mara* (a quarrel between the queer and the shrew) and *Ganazet el-khawal* (the queer's funeral),⁹ probably pearls of 'queer' humour that could under no circumstances be distributed with such titles in present-day Egypt.

As in all culture-related subjects, words are controversial and much debate has been aroused by the use of the term 'homosexuality' in relation to classical, pre-modern and present Arab societies. It is probable that the widespread modern Arabic term *shudbudh jinsi* (sexual deviation), and more politically correct but still seldom found terms such as *mithliyya jinsiyya* (homosexuality) or *junusiyya*,¹⁰ coincide with the Western notion of homosexuality. However, these are recent terms and have no equivalent in local dialects,¹¹ which retain more of a traditional conception of the universe, nor in classical (that is, medieval) Arabic. The classical language has no word to cover the wide spectrum of same-sex attraction and sexuality and, as until recent times in the Western world, does not consider homosexuality as an *identity*. It categorizes different types of homosexual *acts*: some, like

the love of handsome adolescents, are considered expectable from man as a sin-prone creature; others, such as the wish to be sexually dominated by another man, are considered pathological. The language uses such specialized terms as *liwat* (anal sex), *luti* (active sodomite who prefers boys over women, not being concerned with what modern terminology would qualify as occasional bisexuality), *ma'bun* (passive sodomite), *mukhannath* (effeminate passive sodomite), *mu'ajir* (passive male prostitute), *dabb* (active sodomite who likes raping his victims in their sleep regardless of their age), *musabiq* (lesbian), and so on. Some acts are unheard of in medieval literature or jurisprudence, like fellatio, which has no status in *fiqh*. It is therefore natural that research on same-sex eroticism in Arabic literature has been very cautious with its vocabulary, preferring in place of 'homosexuality' terms such as 'homoeroticism' or 'same-sex sexuality', or even *homosensualité* (Malik Chebel).

Four basic notions concerning homoeroticism in classical and modern Arab societies as reflected in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), poetry and prose literature should be stressed.

The first is the acknowledgement in Arabo-Islamic culture of male beauty, even in the eye of other males, and the belief in this beauty's ability to cause *fitna* (disorder). The Quran depicts the effect of the Prophet Yusuf's (Joseph) beauty on the women of Egypt who were so seized by his charm that, on merely seeing him, they cut their hands with the knives they had been given to peel fruit and exclaimed, 'He is not a human being, he must be a noble angel.' Yusuf was subsequently to become a rhetorical trope for the depiction of young male beauty in love poetry. The Quranic paradise is filled with elements to which men are naturally inclined, but are only lawful in the Other Life: wine that 'causes no intoxication' (56:19), served by lads 'eternally young' and who, 'if looked at, seem like scattered pearls' (56:17, 76:19). But in sharp contrast to classical literature and tales such as those found in *The Thousand and One Nights*, the male body's ability to seduce is seldom alluded to in modern literature. One seldom finds any sensuality in the portrayal of a male character. An exception to this is found in the depiction of Gharib in Yusuf Idris's short story, *Hadithat sharaf* (A matter of honour, 1957):

At night [Gharib] couldn't stand sleeping at home and would prefer the tall heap of hay in the village barn. He used to bury himself in it, fondling his thighs and his chest, talking with his friends about girls, of whom they knew nothing [. . .] There was something strange in Gharib, absent in most men. Perhaps it was his excess of manliness, or something else . . . A woman simply had to see his neck, or the string of his

saroual when he was working to start choking as if she had seen a naked man.¹²

Secondly, a consequence of the recognition of male beauty is that a grown man's appreciation of a handsome adolescent's charms is a natural tendency (admitted even by theologians such as Imam Ibn Hanbal, d. 855). This natural appreciation of beauty possibly leads to desire, according to one's tastes, but a desire which has to be resisted. The cardinal sin, in the field of *fiqh*, lies in its realization as a sexual practice. *Fiqh* does not know of sexual identities, and only deals with acts. The *hadith* of the Prophet, as reported in al-Nuwayri's *al-Nihaya*,¹³ is particularly clear and harsh concerning sodomy between men: the active (*al-fa'il*) and the passive (*al-maf'ul bihi*) are to be put to death. But jurists have tended to moderate the severity of the *hadd* (legal sanction) according to the perpetrators' social status. Ibn Hazm went as far as to reduce the bachelor's punishment to ten lashes. Most of those legal dispositions have certainly remained mainly theoretical through the centuries, and it should be noted that pre-modern and colonial Egypt had no law against homosexuality, in spite of the insistence of the British that there should be one.¹⁴

Society as reflected in *adab*, whether poetry or collections of anecdotes, is more tolerant than the sacred law concerning this expected passage from desire to fulfilment; and homosexual intercourse, when occurring between a grown man and one who is submitted to his authority because of his age or his social status, finds its place in the social hierarchy and never jeopardizes the order. There is a similarity between *zina* (illicit intercourse with a woman) and *liwat* (equally illicit anal intercourse with a male one dominates). Everett K. Rowson's work¹⁵ shows how the medieval categorization of vices does not create a list of same-sex relationship 'vices', but rather occasions when man's natural right of dominating his subordinates (women, boys, slaves of both sexes) is illicitly exerted in the sexual field. Although this conception, which could be labelled 'Mediterranean', is still much alive in popular milieus, it is quite under-reflected in modern literature, which adopts a slightly more 'Westernized' construction of the male gender and tends to 'denounce' what are felt as symptoms pertaining to 'underdevelopment'. It should be noted that the Arab press is simultaneously engaged in stigmatizing Western corruption.

Thirdly, man-to-man attraction is not a mere sexual phenomenon, but is also susceptible to being related to love, to passion and its subsequent dangers. Authors concerned with the effects of passion on man – such as Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) in his *Tawq al-hamama* (The dove's necklace) or Ibn al-

Jawzi (d. 1201) in his *Dhamm al-hawa* (Condemnation of passion) – do not deal with man-to-man passions any differently than with heterosexual ones, and depict similar consequences. When preparing his *Masari' al-'ushshaq*, an anthology of anecdotes (at least on first-level reading) about lovers stricken by death over losing their beloved, al-Sarraj (d. 1106) also includes male-to-male tragic love affairs scattered among heterosexual anecdotes. In contrast, while homosexual intercourse is referred to in modern literature, homosexual passion is almost totally absent.¹⁶

Fourthly, whereas attraction of men to boys is a commonplace of classical poetry and prose literature, the attraction of a grown man to another grown man is often underplayed, and is rarely acknowledged except in *mujun* (ribaldry) and *sukhf* (obscenity) related literature. Sexual intercourse, whether heterosexual or homosexual, does not take place between equals and necessarily involves the exercise of power. A bearded man's attraction to another adult male can only mean a desire for submission, which can be either concealed (thus providing proper material for *hija'*, lampoon) or apparent and flaunted: *kbinath*, effeminacy, is the subject of many anecdotes that reveal pleasant transgressions of the norm, but never question it. A man expressing his idolization of the phallus is certainly admitting the loss of his own virility, for he relies on the other's tool instead of his own: as Ibn 'Abbad, reported by Tawhidi (d. 1010), bluntly puts it, 'Do not rely on a cock you find in someone else's pants. There is no cock but your own erect one: if you were to trust another one, it would betray you, shame you, bring scandal to your house and defame you.'¹⁷ The upshot of this is that he indirectly confirms the dominance of the phallus.

Homoeroticism in the classical period is also to be found in works standing at the inner and outer limits of the classical notion of *adab* – for the *adib* (man of education) has the right to write and read about 'lower' subjects (*bstil*, *sukhf*) so as to rest his mind from seriousness, but the language used has to be that of *adab*. The *mujun* (ribaldry) version of chaste homoeroticism found in poetry was also to be found for instance in the famous treatise on erotology by the Maghriban mineralogist, Ahmad al-Tifashi (d.1253). Titled *Nuzhat al-albab fi ma la yujad fi kitab* (The promenade of hearts in what is to be found in no other book), the text is ripe with piquant and often hilarious anecdotes on the underworld of active and passive homosexuals, their argot, their classifications of the male organ according to shape and size, and their witty (often blasphemous) replies when scorned by heterosexuals or men of religion.¹⁸ At the outer limits of *adab* lies 'popular' literature, such as the shadow plays that were widespread in Egypt in the Mamluk period. The only remnant of this type of production is a highly literary rendition of it by Ibn Daniyal (d. 1310) in three

shadow plays, two of which – *Tayfal-khayal* (The imaginary shadow) and *Al-mutayyam wa-l-yutayyim* (The man stricken by passion and the little orphan/the cause of passion) – expose a character's rowdy life, full of homosexual adventures, until final repentance and death. This image of homosexual attraction as a possible entrapment in a youth's formation is repeated in the many stories of *The Thousand and One Nights*, in which the pederast Maghriban shaykh chanting his love for the young fifteen-year-old hero represents nothing but a trap that should be avoided on the path of initiation to manhood.

But whether homoeroticism is to be found in its chaste and often symbolic versions, or on the contrary in its coarsest expression in amusing *nawadir*, it is in classical literature a pervasive phenomenon, whether connected to love or to condemnable ribaldry. If a tragic tone is to be found, it is because unrewarded love is tragic, never because of its homosexual nature. Classical literature expresses the confident view of man unchallenged in his domination over the other sex, in his rule over non-Muslim communities, and ultimately in his manhood. Even rare examples to the contrary, like Jahshaway's affirmation of his passivity, are panegyrics to the Arabo-Islamic penis.

Modern literature,¹⁹ on the other hand, is often an expression of self-doubt, sometimes of self-hatred, and the Arab male's certainty of being at the centre of the universe has vanished. Politically, economically and culturally challenged, his power, thus his virility, cannot be exerted as it was in the age of certainties. The view of homosexuality could not remain unaffected by this major shift. The limited treatment of same-sex relationships in modern Arabic literature in contrast to classical literature is somewhat puzzling. Among the modern Arab novelists there is no Proust, Wilde or Gide whose works can be read in a 'gay' light,²⁰ let alone a Gore Vidal or David Leavitt whose works include openly gay content. Homosexual characters are scarce, although not necessarily depicted in derogatory terms. AIDS is unheard of and this aspect of the underworld of the great cities of the Arab world still generally remains ignored. Although the Arabic novel (if we accept Haykal's *Zaynab* as a starting point) emerged in a realist genre, striking was the absence of a whole aspect of realism: that of sentimental and erotic life. Perhaps because sexual desire, whether heterosexual, homosexual or undefined and unwilling to be defined, has to be so thoroughly concealed in Arab societies, it paradoxically cannot be restrained to special places or situations. As a result, desire is disseminated everywhere and at any time, even on the most unlikely occasions. There is a strong, almost palpable erotic and homoerotic tension obvious in such formal events as *mawlid*s, as well as in daily life, on buses and other forms of public trans-

port, in cinemas, even in the streets where gauging glances are exchanged. In the homosexual field, the non-existence (and impossibility) of a gay ghetto means that homosexual desire is to be found throughout the anonymous metropolises like Cairo and Beirut. But much of this atmosphere is suppressed, unseen or ignored in modern literature, although one can hardly imagine writers to be so blind as to miss it. The universal figure of the 'queen' is not alluded to, even humorously, in written works.

Allusions to homosexuality in modern literature can generally be seen as falling into three types: homosexuality may be represented as a typical aspect of traditional society, either to be denounced or simply neutrally described, and a secondary character may embody this conception; a homosexual character, whether central or secondary, is often represented as undergoing severe *malaise* and loss of self-worth, possibly leading to death or suicide; thirdly, homosexuality may be articulated in the traumatic relationship with the Other, usually the Western foreigner. But whether considered from a medical, psychoanalytic, pathological, traumatic, dramatic or symbolic viewpoint, homosexuality is never a matter of laughter (even derogatory laughter) or amusement. There is no happy homosexuality, or piquant anecdotes in modern literature, and there are hardly any indecent allusions. The most scabrous *nawadir* of classical literature can be read with pleasure and a smile, for they are narrated with an eagerness for wit, a grace and a frankness about the relationship with the body that transcends vulgarity. Al-Jahiz's (d. 868) introduction to the *Mufakharat al-jawari wa-l-ghilman* (Book of maids and lads) is a case in point. Amusement is seen as a most natural function of literature and the soul must be soothed with jest, for an excess of seriousness would burden it: 'some of those who flaunt piety and asceticism express embarrassment and revolt at the mention of vulva, penis and coitus. But such people are most often of little knowledge, devoid of elevation and dignity if only in this affectation of theirs.'

The queer of the hara (popular quarter): symptom of an ill society?

Homosexual attraction is seen by Taha Husayn in *al-Ayyam* as the coincidence between natural inclination and deprivation of the feminine element: a chapter in the third part of his fictional autobiography is significantly entitled, 'A consequence of the absence of women'.²¹ But attraction felt for either females or males by the companions of the narrator (who refers to himself in the third person as *al-sabi*, the boy) in their years as Azhari students is also

subtly and elegantly linked in this chapter to their literary preferences:

They had read the poetry of Abu Nuwas and his fellows, and also the verses of early Umayyad and 'Udhri poets,²² [. . .] and had subsequently followed their own tastes in such matters. The conservatives preferred the 'Udhri authors and their love poetry, whereas the modernists chose the love habits of the Abbasid times. They all created ideals of beauty according to their literary tastes, and addressed verses to their beloved. But whereas the conservatives had no choice but to forge utterly fictional ideals, for life had put a barrier between them and their 'belles', the modernists were more fortunate, as they could find outside or inside al-Azhar itself many pretty faces that provided them with real-life material for their poetic courtship. Some followed the path of Jamil and Kuthayyir,²³ and their fate was that of total deprivation, while the others favoured Abu Nuwas's example; they were to suffer less deprivation and gain some measure of satisfaction.

Taha Husayn's innuendo never goes beyond his last sentence's humorous understatement. One of the blind boy's friends is '*nuwasi*²⁴ in his poetry and in his tastes', and seems to find no trouble in making interesting acquaintances in the milieu of turn-of-the-century religious students. Taha Husayn's good taste, however, means that he declines to mention whether his friend's activities go any further than reciting amorous verses to his good-looking companions during private *majalis*, as the narrator mischievously describes their encounters, using with intended vagueness the same classical term poets used, for a *majlis*-session can be anything from a chaste exchange of burning verses to putting those verses into practice. But the friend's too obvious attitude soon results in embarrassment for the whole group when they discover a malignant hand has scribbled on a wall in the Abbasid Gallery of al-Azhar those (in)famous verses addressed by Abu Muhammad al-Yazidi to the ninth-century philologist, Abu 'Ubayda:

May the prayer of God be upon Loth and his people
O Abu 'Ubayda, and say amen, by God,
For I see that you are without doubt their only remnant . . .²⁵

As the *nuwasi* boy's companions chose to laugh the whole thing off, we are left to wonder whether Taha Husayn's apparently non-judgemental attitude to homosexuality reflects an almost pre-modern amusement towards

a sexual peculiarity that bears no greater consequence than that of a literary choice, a traditional neutrality mildly moderated by the adult writer's opinion by 1950 that male-to-male attraction derives from the strict separation of men and women in early twentieth-century society, or on the other hand whether such an attitude is simply a manifestation of this humanistic thinker's tolerance.

The first obviously homosexual *character* in a modern Arabic novel is probably the *ma'alleem* Kersha in Egyptian novelist Nagib Mahfuz's *Zuqaq al-midaqq* (Midaq Alley, 1947). The author created this character with much fear of censorship at the time, but felt compelled to place him in the popular *hara* (quarter) for he 'wanted to present archetypes of all sorts of inhabitants of a popular dwelling, and this was a common archetype. The owners of coffee-shops were renowned for this thing, and rumour has it that the owner of the Fishawi²⁶ himself [was].'²⁷ The sixtyish coffee-shop owner of this novel unwisely invites his young and slightly too obvious lovers to a free glass of tea at his place, to the knowledge of the whole neighbourhood, until his crazed wife (and mother of five) decides to make a public scandal, sweeps her dazed 'co-spouse' out of the coffee-shop and insults her boy-loving husband before a company of amused customers. But when Shaykh Darwish, the café's local sufi, draws the moral of the scene, he simply declares, 'This is an old evil, that is called in English homosexuality, but it is not love. True love is for the Family of the Prophet.' Such a conclusion, which should not be mistaken for Mahfuz's view on homosexuality, does not seem far from the medieval mystical conception: if homosexuality is not true love, it is not because it is against nature but because true love is reserved for God. It should also be noticed that the character's use of the English tongue to define homosexuality makes it a phenomenon both widespread but so unspoken of that even the common language remains mute when it comes to expressing it.

Other novels by Mahfuz portray homosexuals. In *al-Sukkariyya* (*Sugar Street*), the last part of the Cairo trilogy, published in 1957, the young and handsome Radwan uses his beauty to seduce an elderly Pasha and soon becomes a prominent figure in a right-wing monarchist party.²⁸ Although a mere archetype in Mahfuz's panorama of Egyptian youth in the 1940s, it is remarkable that the homosexual character is the only one that chooses the past and the aristocratic world of the Egypt-Ottoman condemned elite, almost as if to suggest that his sexual life were another remnant of *al-'abd al-ba'id* (the ancien régime). Another notable character is Wahid, one of the heroes of *Malhamat al-harafish* (*The epic of beggars*, 1977),²⁹ a parable on the corrupting effect of power and the decay of time. Wahid restores the rule of

the *hara* to the family of the founder of a dynasty of *fetewwat* (bullies), 'Ashur al-Nagi, who soon becomes intoxicated by his newly found power and turns into another tyrant, but cannot refrain from parading with his minions. When he dies of a stroke caused by his gluttony, he is denied burial at the side of his mythical ancestors. Mahfuz's vocabulary is significant as he evokes this character when asked about homosexuals in his works: 'One of the *harafish* is afflicted (*usiba*) with homosexuality, among other signs of his *moral decline*.'³⁰ There are, though, some differences between this portrayal of homosexuality as evidence of a decline in the exercise of power and, say, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's attacks on the almighty Buyid vizier al-Sahib b. 'Abbad³¹ for boasting his preference for boys over women in his prose as in his poetry. The medieval author does not condemn the love of boys *per se*, but the unnecessary, obscene and untimely display of this minor vice, a mere peccadillo when restricted to private circles. Mahfuz on the other hand qualifies it as an illness (using the verb *usiba*) and a sign of degeneration.

The homosexual in the contemporary Egyptian novel or short story is seldom a central figure, rather just another typical character of the popular *hara* of Cairo, who provides a vehicle for conveying stock-type representations of homosexuality which may in the process be endorsed, challenged or transmitted neutrally. Thus in Gamal al-Ghitani's novel *Waqa'i' harat al-Za'farani* (Incidents in Zafarani Alley),³² we find Samir, a shy young man who secretly visits the Hammam al-Ahrar³³ at night to get sodomized by 'Ewes, the 'stallion' from Upper Egypt who works all night and can satisfy seven customers in a row. The social mingling that homosexual intercourse can entail is vividly evoked by Ghitani: when the hammam owner approaches 'Ewes in a café, it is in these terms that he lures him into accepting his job:

He offered a position envied by many: he would become clean, eat meat everyday, and be accommodated if he agreed to stay all night at the hammam. He would receive a monthly salary like civil servants, and what he would have to perform would be both easy and pleasant. Every night he would meet many respectable effendis, some of them occupying high ranks in society and deciding the destiny of people. Some of them were famous, appeared on television and were interviewed on the radio, which made their coming to the hammam highly secret. If he really pleased them, they might give him a nice baksheesh. 'Ewes accepted at once.

Whereas the effendi clients of the hammam can fulfil the universal fantasy

of sex with the virile worker,³⁴ whom they wouldn't address in normal circumstances, during the intercourse the young *fellah* can dominate those same figures of authority. When asked by a customer to insult him and hit him, he eagerly performs the act as a regular service, although with utter respect.³⁵ This hammam is not only a site where sexual rulings are transgressed, it is also the place where social boundaries are blurred, although only up to and at the moment of climax. It is remarkable then that 'Ewes, who has not been deterred from having intercourse with men on any moral grounds – for he had the active role – and who has found the necessary desire to perform as expected, finally fears that practising sex only with men might end up in him losing his attraction to females. When the insatiable Umm Yusuf approaches him, he finds himself unable to fantasize about her: 'As he stretched out on his bed and folded his garment into a pillow he put under his head, something began to oppress him, preventing him from fantasizing about Umm Yusuf. He couldn't make himself come. Did his work prevent him from having intercourse with women? He became alarmed. Would he after a while turn into one of his customers?' The next day those fears result in him being unable to satisfy the famous journalist who pays the owner of the hammam fantastic sums of money to ensure himself the exclusivity of the stallion's services. This enrages the owner, who has fed 'Ewes with expensive meat.

Frequency of male-male intercourse is certainly regarded as one of the indicators that allow a distinction to be drawn between socially tolerable – although undiscussed – sexual acts and a perceived flaw of character. The repetition of homosexual acts, even as the active partner, is felt by 'Ewes as jeopardizing of his virility: a mere amusement is turned into an illness, or something that could perhaps come to resemble an identity. Moreover, when a man sleeps often with other men, one cannot be sure of what really takes place between them both, and as Tawhidi mischievously said of Ibn 'Abbad: 'kam harbatin fi l-qawmi sarat ja'batan' ('many a spear has become a quiver').³⁶ But if there is something close to an identity, it can only be linked to the passive partner: 'Ewes is not so much afraid of becoming addicted to men, thus losing his desire for women, than of becoming one of 'them'.

As an extreme separation between sexes and deprivation of the feminine element leads to substitutive homosexual intercourse, writers are inclined to describe or denounce traditional society as a 'cause' of homosexuality. Prisons everywhere in the world also illustrate the need for any type of sexual gratification. Egyptian writers of the *adab al-sujun* (prison literature) genre have alluded to rapes occurring during incarceration, but only Ra'uf

Mus'ad, in *Baydat al-Na'ama* (The egg of the ostrich), has shown how the fulfilment of a bodily need can also lead to true affection. As his narrator evokes memories as a political prisoner during the Nasser era in the Western Desert oasis camp, where inmates could freely wander around the camp day and night and paradoxically enjoyed a certain liberty despite terrible conditions, he recalls how two inmates would gradually get closer to each other:

Two smart eyes stare at him and share feelings he has not been able to disclose to anyone. Is it that half-cigarette they smoked together, cautiously trying to find their way in the dark? They don't trust each other yet. There's that fear of not reaching an understanding. It would mean a scandal that would isolate you from the mainstream [. . .] Small things begin to grow, each one caring about the other's daily life, creating a common oasis in those sands. Then feelings are progressively unveiled. It begins with the body declaring itself. Fingertips touch, hands feel hands, each one cares for the other's body. If the two are lucky, they won't be caught by curious and dubious glances. If they're lucky, they might even share a cell, put their mattresses alongside and be together in sleep, until one of them finally makes the long-delayed move.

You would be wrong to think this is close to what happens with common-law inmates. There's no comparison. Here, the body is stripped of action, it becomes a mere condition. It doesn't secrete as much as it reveals. There is no active or passive partner. Only two equals, who equally desire to help the other 'get it out'.

When the camps opened their gates, everyone went his own way, to a former or a new life, to his family, his wife (or got married and had kids). The guys might meet again afterwards (generally by chance) and talk about the present and the future. But each one of them knew that this bodily revelation had its special conditions, and even if one of them wanted to re-create them, he wouldn't find a favourable atmosphere to let the feeling grow. I only know of one exception to this rule.³⁷

Although portraying himself as a womanizer in the novel, the narrator does not seem to exclude himself from an experience that goes further than substitutive homosexual intercourse and becomes substitutive homosexual *affection*. The individual subsequently represses a desire he has felt and fulfilled in particular conditions, but avoids his former lover and cannot help some embarrassment when meeting him (they speak of the present, not of the past) for they both know that in *favourable* conditions the dividing line

between heterosexuality and homosexuality becomes very thin indeed, and the needs of the body might reveal some needs of the heart.

The individual's awakening

Since the modern Egyptian novel is preoccupied with society as a whole, and characters tend to be mere representative archetypes of society's diversity, there is little place for the individual, and reflections on their sexual preferences or identity are avoided. The cruelty with which the passive partner is treated can be alluded to when felt as an error of adolescence, as is the case in *al-Raqa al-mubaha* (The permitted dance, 1981), a short story by Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdallah. A young boy caught being sodomized by a friend of his own age is killed by his father because of the shame brought upon the family, while the other boy, the 'top' (active partner) is expelled from the village. But the story is aimed primarily at stigmatizing rural society's savagery when openly confronted with sexual deviations that could simply be dealt with by means of a suitable punishment; it certainly does not legitimize the homosexual act. Yusuf Idris's (d. 1991) short story, *Abu al-rigal* (A leader of men, 1987), adopts a free indirect narrative style to convey the point of view of Sultan, the ageing leader of a group of gangsters who finds himself confronted with the unbearable fantasy of being the passive partner for one of his subordinates, *al-Tor* ('the Bull'). He remembers his village's effeminate miller, Shahin, who paid boys to fuck him in the corn fields, and dreams himself, in the ambiguous conclusion of the short story, of becoming another Shahin despite having spent a whole life as the most manly male of the community. The reader cannot clearly decide whether his fantasy of proposing himself to 'al-Tor' is realized or merely imagined, but the clear impression left by the story is that allowing oneself to be possessed by another male leads to general mockery and loss of social status.

Such a feeling is beautifully depicted in the work by Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus (d. 1997), *Tuqus al-isharat wa-l-tahawwulat* (The rites of signs and transformations).³⁸ This is one of the finest studies of homosexual desire in modern Arabic literature. Set in an imaginary nineteenth-century Damascus, an effeminate male prostitute, Semsem, meets 'Abbas, who has already used his 'services'. 'Abbas is one of the Mufti's handymen and the city's most famous braggart. He is accompanied by his best friend, al-'Afsa, a feared swaggerer who affects disgust on seeing the catamite. Taking revenge on al-'Afsa for his contempt, Semsem reveals to 'Abbas that his

best friend is really a closet passive homosexual and is dying of love for him. When confronted with this accusation, Al-'Afsa confesses his love to 'Abbas, who agrees to fuck him and swears to keep the whole affair secret. 'Abbas soon loses interest in al-'Afsa. In a key scene,³⁹ al-'Afsa appears before his love, 'burnt' by passion. He has shaven his face, affects effeminacy in his gestures and has turned into another Semsem: he has plucked his body hair, hoping he will be more desirable, for he has discovered in submissiveness 'a pleasure [he had] been longing for all [his] life'. He offers 'Abbas his moustache, folded in a handkerchief, for it is 'the most precious thing [he] owns'. As 'Abbas grows disgusted by such a transformation, al-'Afsa justifies what we might call his 'coming-out':

Do not kill me, Abu Fahd! I have done this for you, for you only. And you know that what I have done has cost me much. In our country, it is like death, or worse than death. You pretend to be disgusted and angry, but you are in search of a false pretence to break what is between us. I won't be able to bear your leaving me. I can't stand it if after changing my constitution you throw me off. [. . .] My appearance is now that of my true self, I look like myself. Didn't you tell me you hated two-faced people? The only thing I've done has been to accord my appearance to my essence. I have nothing to hide any more. [. . .] Passion is what allowed me to appear to myself and to the world, and it gives me courage and life.

But 'Abbas denies that there could be any passion between men. When asked by al-'Afsa what was between the two of them, he answers:

What was between us was mere desire, that dissipates after being completed. I took pleasure in mounting a man who was universally considered a swaggerer, watching him bend and make himself small between my legs. But now, what pleasure could I derive from mounting a stupid catamite?

While al-'Afsa goes on to boast about his love for 'Abbas around the city, his lover crudely rejects him, and he consequently commits suicide. This interesting analysis of the homosexual relationship in a traditional society shows it as non-committing for the active partner, although it paradoxically demands secrecy: 'Abbas can cope with Semsem's short allusion to the fact that they have had intercourse, as long as it flatters his virile strength, but will not bear it being repeated too often and cannot refrain from insulting him. He will certainly not tolerate al-'Afsa's revelation of his love

for him either. As for the conception of homosexual desire in the play, it is represented as being entangled in a dialectical conflict between two opposite fantasies, one of virility and domination, and another of femininity and the need for affection. The active partner's desire is but a brief spark, aroused by forcing the other's virility to surrender into femininity, and dying as soon as it triumphs. 'Abbas and al-'Afsa's unrewarded love affair is a tragedy which, unlike in classical literature, is clearly portrayed as a consequence of homosexuality and not simply of unrewarded passion.

A short story by the journalist and playwright Muhammad Salmawi, *Ashara tawila* (A game of backgammon)⁴⁰ presents an unusually encoded homosexual theme which insists, typically, on the loneliness and ephemeral quality attached to the homosexual act. On a superficial level, the story deals with a provincial young man who cannot stand his loneliness in Cairo and sets out on a rainy night for any kind of encounter: '[A]ny human being, woman, man, child, old man, whatever . . . He just needed the presence of somebody with him . . . before him . . . at his side.' He enters the coffee-house of al-Hagg Sultan, where the steaming breath of clients and smoke from the waterpipes provide the place with an eerie atmosphere, in which men seem to move as indistinct ghosts. Around each table he finds two men sitting face to face, playing *tawila* (backgammon), some being silently watched by others. He finally spots an isolated young man waiting in front of his *tawila*, and joins him without uttering a single word. He simply fetches the dice and starts playing. His hand is jerky at first, then touches the dice and the pieces with softness and a regular rhythm. Their game becomes so passionate that many spectators rally around them to watch. The dice fall on the ground, and one of the two men will have to bend to take them on the ground. Both stare at each other, then his fellow player bends and submissively presents the dice.

He seized the dice with self-confidence noticed by the spectators, whereas the young man was staring at him in surrender. He went on shaking the dice faster and faster (*zalla yaruggu al-zahr fi sur'a mutazayida*), then threw them violently on the table (*thumma qadhafa bihi bi-quwwa 'ala al-tawila*) in front of his fellow player, as a cry rose from one of the spectators 'double-six' (*dush*), then the game ended (*intahat al-'ashara*). He calmly stood up and left the coffee shop silently, just as he had entered it.

The steamy coffee-shop is a metaphor for a Turkish bath, and its name obviously refers to the Hammam al-Sultan, one of Cairo's well-known homosexual meeting places in the old al-Husayn district. The couples 'playing' together clearly allude to ephemeral lovers, watched in action by excited

voyeurs. It should be noted that *darb 'ashara* in Egyptian slang means 'to jerk off' and that the vocabulary used in the final sequence constantly plays on double-entendre (the verb *qadhafa* also means ejaculate; *dush* for double-six also means shower) until the climaxing conclusion. But although the key for a proper reading is given in the first lines of the text and the text doesn't make much sense if not read at this level, the whole story, so evasively homosexual, seems to be a mere intellectual game written for the 'happy few' able to decipher the allusions and recognize the subtext, in much the way that Cairo has its underworld homosexual slang (*sim al-kawanin*) known only to them.⁴¹

Hoda Barakat's much acclaimed first novel, *Hajar al-dahik* (*The Laughing Stone*),⁴² set in Beirut during Lebanon's civil war, is probably the first and only Arabic novel with a male homosexual as main character, and ironically or significantly enough this bold step was taken by a woman. Khalil, whom the narrator observes with amorous and motherly eyes, does not realize at first that he is homosexual. He simply wonders why he is so obsessed with his visiting friend Nagi's hairy thighs, to the degree that he hardly listens to what his friend tells him. After Nagi's death, Khalil falls in silent and distant love with a militia man called Yusuf, a twenty-year-old bully who jokes with his buddies about girls, and embodies a type of virility the author ascribes to 'those who have torn off the gate of manhood' and rule people's everyday life, while older men take care of important matters. But 'those two manhoods have closed their gates before Khalil, he has remained alone in a narrow passage, on a demarcation line between two highly appealing regions, in a vegetative stillness close to submissive womanhood, when active manhoods that trigger off life's volcano are almost within reach.'⁴³ In a beautiful passage, Khalil wonders what he really wants from Yusuf, whose image blends, in Khalil's wild fantasy, with Prophet Yusuf as portrayed in the Quran, when he is seduced by the wife of Putiphar, Zulaikha in Islamic tradition:

Give a single clear answer and you'll be relieved. But there was no clear answer, and no clear answer was convincing, and a clear and convincing answer was certainly not a relief . . . I desire Yusuf the way Zulaikha wanted to hold him back [. . .] All this suffering because Yusuf is handsome and because I'm a spouse of another gender. I am prompting him to commit all sorts of evil and corrupt deeds, then I slap my face in lamentation, gather my women and point at him, but they cannot see him, and only my hands are cut, while the oranges of my desire remain untouched, bright and round [. . .] Every time I touch his shirt I tear it

from behind. I have torn it thousands of times from behind, but he hasn't seen me, hasn't turned toward me, and his shirt is left untorn . . .⁴⁴

Khalil has a longing for submission, unutterable, unrealizable, and his asexuality is in the end the exact opposite of action. Khalil is slowly realizing he is homosexual, but his sexual orientation is merely an element in his reluctance to choose virility. Being a non-man is hesitation and passivity, just as womanhood is doomed to mean passivity in a country at war, when civilization is put between brackets. Khalil is at the end of the novel offered a position by the *al-Akh* ('the Brother'), a war lord whom we understand will help him in exchange for a night spent with him. We are not told whether Khalil sleeps with the man or not, and whether he has his first physical homosexual experience with a physically and morally repulsive individual (although he seems to love Khalil sincerely) instead of the object of his desire. But 'the Brother' has the power to open for Khalil the gates to one of those 'manhoods' that seemed out of reach, specifically that of men who bear responsibilities.

In the last scene, Khalil has become a local bully himself, and he rapes his neighbour's daughter. Has he slept with 'the Brother' and got an eminent position in the party, possibly higher than 'the Brother' himself? Has he chosen another party? We are left to guess. But at last, Khalil has taken action. Confronted with the unbearable choice of being a victim or a torturer (for neutrality or isolation are impossible, as the novel shows), he has chosen the latter solution. And the end of hesitation is also the end of 'passive' sexuality: whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. Khalil is now able to impose his desire, he can rape a woman and can probably get as many Yusufs as he wishes. It should be stressed that Khalil has not 'become straight' in the last scene. The narrator does not equate homosexuality with passiveness; she equates *femininity* (under the circumstances of civil war) with passiveness. Khalil's renouncement of femininity is not necessarily a renouncement of his attraction to other men, but the narrator's beloved character has simply become, in the narrator's words, 'a man who laughs', but also a violent monster she fails to condemn.

Homosexual intercourse as a metaphor for the relationship with the West

One of the most abrasive accounts of traditional attitudes towards homosexual relationships, and also one of the best illustrations of the difference

that exists in a society of separated sexes between man-to-man intercourse and a hypothetical 'homosexual identity', is to be found in Moroccan author Mohamed Choukri's fictionalized autobiography, *al-Khubz al-hafi* (*For Bread Alone*).⁴⁵ But this rare intrusion of pornography in an Arabic novel certainly doesn't aim at arousing the reader. Rather, it is distinctly unsettling when read in the context of the narrator's material and moral misery. Three consecutive scenes, set in the Tangiers of the early 1950s,⁴⁶ oppose the sixteen-year-old narrator, whom poverty has turned into a marginal character, to homosexuals trying or succeeding in taking advantage of him. The first man, a young Moroccan, spots him in the railway station as he unsuccessfully tries to work as a baggage holder, sits next to him and offers him food, a sip of wine and a cigarette. But when he later proposes to him that he sleep over at his place, the narrator finds that, 'His eyes are not innocent. To hell with this kind of generosity!' He declines the offer, adding to himself that he is not angry with the man for he has at least 'put the birds of his stomach to silence'. Then an old Spaniard driving a car stops besides him and invites him for a ride that ends in the suburbs.

We were driving towards the suburbs. He's queer (*hassas*), there's no doubt about that. [. . .] He softly fingers my crotch. The real ride was about to begin. He slowly unbuttons my pants, switches on the roof-light and leans over me. His breath warms it. He licks it, then swallows half of it. His mouth was going back and forth, and he gave me a hard on. I didn't dare stare at him as he said: 'Bravo, bravo. Macho!'

[. . .] in order to come faster, I fantasized I was raping Assia in Tetouan. I came in his mouth. He hummed with pleasure, like an animal. He took a handkerchief and wiped off his mouth, dripping with my semen. His face was red, eyes bulging, lips drooping.

I crossed my arms on my chest as if nothing had happened. There's plenty of women. Why should one be queer (*luti*),⁴⁷ I thought?

After the old man gives him fifty pesetas, the narrator realizes: 'My "thing" can earn money and help me live as well. And it can also derive pleasure from this [. . .] This is the way one turns into a hustler.'

In a third scene, the narrator is forced to sleep in a stable also used as a shady hotel, and hardly escapes some drunken pederasts, who insist on calling him *ghazal* (gazelle, meaning pretty boy) and seem to take it for granted he has come to sleep with them.

Grouped in a single chapter, these adventures offer an insight into different kinds of homosexual encounters that are fairly common in twentieth-century cities of the Arab world. All are directly associated by the author

with poverty and deprivation, as if homosexual intercourse were necessarily a sexuality of substitution, a *pis-aller* for heterosexual intercourse.⁴⁸ But the local Moroccan male is assumed to be a 'top', thus a danger: the narrator flees both the local man 'cruising' him at the railway station, and the beggars. He will only accept to follow the foreigner, assuming the latter is passive, and perhaps also out of fascination. Homosexual intercourse as the active partner does not make him a *hassas*, a colloquial word derived from classical Arabic 'sensitive' only applying to the passive partner. Even if pleasure is derived from the sexual encounter, there has to be a compensation in cash: the narrator can clear his conscience first by claiming he will only engage in such relations for money, and also by being the object of this solicitation. Accepting solicitation is in no way comparable to soliciting, and enables one to refuse assuming responsibility for the pleasure one has taken. It is certainly no coincidence that the old man with whom the narrator has sex, clinically described in its crudest details so as to force the reader's disgust, is a foreigner.⁴⁹

Literature often displaces the shock of the encounter with the West into the arena of sexuality. This shift is certainly inevitable, and proves the traumatic nature of this meeting of cultures. It has affected one of the most intimate elements of human life, the relationship to the body and to sexuality. Domination and submission are symbolized through sexuality, and the effect is described in its pathological dimensions. The Arab man is symbolically or physically abused by the West, and if politically dominated, will sexually dominate in response. But even when active, being a mere object of fantasy makes him feel he is ultimately the loser, as in *For Bread Alone*. This metaphorical representation of the conflict between the Arab world and the colonizing – or post-colonizing West – as a sexual encounter and a fight for domination was brilliantly evoked by al-Tayyib Salih in *Mawsim al-hijra ila al-shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*).⁵⁰ Many 'homosexual' counterparts are to be found with heavy symbolic resonance in the literature of 'progressive' authors. Gamal al-Ghitani, in his short story *Hadha ma gara lil-shabb al-ladhi asbaha funduqiyyan* (This is what happened to the boy who worked in a hotel)⁵¹ presents a young university graduate who dreams of working as a diplomat, but has no future as a civil servant in Sadat's Egypt at the time of the *infitah* (economic opening up). He reluctantly chooses to work in a five-star hotel in Cairo owned by a multinational company. The young man is unaware of his extremely good looks that are naturally noticed by the Egyptian manager. The latter strategically places him at the entrance to the restaurant, and merely lets him help guests to their tables for a comfortable salary. When a Dutch woman, then an elderly American lady, try to get his attention, the manager makes it clear

that the customer should be satisfied, and the young man once again reluctantly accepts. Then a Saudi tries to seduce him, recites poetry, pinches his cheeks and offers him a golden watch, which he bluntly refuses. The angry manager tries to convince him:

You don't realize your interests, the interests of the hotel, the interests of the country. They've spent sixteen million on this building and they phone every day. Upsetting his excellency could affect our relationship. And then, what are you afraid of? Do you think he'll make you do anything you don't feel like doing? Of course not . . . Maybe you'll find him wearing a woman's nightie . . .⁵²

The young man refuses and resigns, but is woken up by the police the next day and informed that his 'prints are all over room 177'. This not too subtle metaphor of Egypt prostituting itself to the West and the Gulf states is also to be found in works by Sun'allah Ibrahim such as *al-Lagna* and *Sharaf*.

Sharaf (Honour, 1997) is Sun'allah Ibrahim's latest novel and its title is the (highly symbolic) name of the novel's hero. It is a return to the 'prison literature' genre developed in the late 1960s and 70s. But whereas the politically aware intellectual hero of the 70s was sent to jail as an opponent, Sharaf begins his descent to hell after having accidentally killed an American who has tried to rape him. In the opening chapter, twenty-year-old Sharaf is strolling through downtown Cairo, gazing at shop windows displaying Swatches, Nike shoes, Adidas training suits and Schott jackets, following blonde female tourists in miniskirts, hesitating between buying Marlboro cigarettes or seeing a Schwarzenegger movie. He is approached in front of the Rivoli Cinema (an actual gay cruising spot in Cairo) by John, who offers him a ticket for the show, which he declines. But since 'like all blond-haired foreigners in Egypt, he wasn't used to hearing no', John finally convinces the young man to accept his offer, then invites him to his home in the posh Zamalek district for a drink. Sharaf admits to being deprived of everything:

The confession began like a song by Umm Kulthum – totally melodramatic: I'm fed up with my life, I want to leave this country, I wish you could take me far away.

The *khawaga* (gentleman) remained silent, and simply put his golden chain around the young man's neck, then lay his hand on his thigh and started fondling it.⁵³

The foreigner shows Sharaf a porn magazine, then tries to clasp him in his arms. While trying to escape, Sharaf hits the American with a bottle and kills him. This aborted rape of 'the innocent Egyptian' leads Sharaf to jail, in which other instances of equally metaphorical rapes of the country by foreign powers and corrupt nationals are exposed. It is remarkable that while jails were the setting of homosexual rapes and, at the opposite pole, long-term homosexual relations between inmates in the Oasis of Kharga in Sun'allah's first collection of short stories, *Tilka al-ra'iba* (The smell of it),⁵⁴ and in Ra'uf Mus'ad's *Baydat al-na'ama* (The egg of the ostrich), there are no such scenes in *Sharaf*. The hero of *Sharaf* escapes rape in prison, and although he seems to fall into a very close and loving friendship with a fellow inmate, their love never leads to physical fulfilment: it is as if all corruptions are actually outside the jail, despite the daily humiliation and deprivation inside. It would be hard not to notice the opening scene's utter improbability: what twenty-year-old Egyptian would be innocent enough to misinterpret the *khawaga*'s invitation, and furthermore his active rapist's attitude, precipitating the hero's fatal act of self-defence, is unbelievable. The author's overly demonstrative symbolism, only retrieved by his inimitably sarcastic tone, leads him to this dubious scene: the West is simply 'fucking' Egypt, which when acting in self-defence gets sent to jail. What a change from the first doubts expressed in the 1960s by al-Tayyib Salih: back then, the colonized African Arab took his revenge on political submission by behaving as a womanizer, turning his phallus into a weapon of sexual domination and revenge. The loss of faith in the present has gone so far in the novel of the 90s that the Arab is now, even on the metaphorical level of sexuality, the victim of the Western phallus.

But why is this articulated by means of a homosexual relationship? Stephan Guth, discussing the increasing frequency of sexual passages in Egyptian novels in the 1980s, rightly observes that, 'The taboos which are broken, however, are only aesthetic taboos, taboos on a linguistic level. It must be permissible to talk about what is going on in the surrounding reality – but that does not mean calling for a system of ethical values which is really new. On the contrary: in terms of traditional sexual mores even the "pornographic" passages are nothing but affirmative. Thus, in those scenes traditional morality is, for the time being, not questioned but only radicalized.'⁵⁵ Is it so surprising that this use of homosexual sexuality as a sign of decay should be found in the literature of leftist and nationalist writers? Hannah Arendt did warn of the formidable reactionary content of the revolutionaries' search for purity.

Invisible desire

Various explanations of the infrequency of homoerotic themes in modern literature, as compared to classical, can be suggested. The first trail to follow is obviously the close relationship between the act of writing and the socio-political context in which writing is performed. Contemporary Arab writers, whether supportive of, opposing or neutral towards the regimes under which they live, cannot fail to be cognizant of the fact that their writings can fall foul to accusations by government or opposition forces of corrupting society. Censorship and self-censorship are indissociable from writing in the twentieth century, and one cannot easily write what one knows will be denied publication or, worse, may endanger one's life.⁵⁶

But if censorship has become so wary of the mention of homosexuality, it is because public morality has changed. The values pertaining to sexual morality in Arab societies have deeply evolved since the colonial confrontation with the West, as shown by Bruce Dunne's work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt.⁵⁷ In most urbanized Arab societies, those values that are hastily disguised as *'adatuna wa-taqaliduna* (our customs and traditions) are in fact rather new moral trends which began taking shape in the era known as the *Nabda* (renaissance), and are quite often at odds with classical (or rather pre-modern) representations of virility, as exemplified in *adab* literature which allowed for a wider spectrum of male desire. This 'modern' morality is also partly at odds with popular representations and male sexual practices – which see little harm in active homosexual intercourse – easily vilified as evidence of the residue of underdevelopment, ignorance and lack of education. The newly enforced values are a reformist construction resulting from the encounter between a theoretical Islamic ethics of normalized sexuality, the influence of colonial domination and the desire to adopt Victorian-style norms as a token of 'civilization'.

One should remember that when in 1834 Muhammad 'Ali banned the *ghawazi* (female belly dancers) from performing publicly their 'obscene' dances, female impersonators (*khawalat*)⁵⁸ legally took their place and performed at weddings and in the cafés: it was felt at that time that men casting aside their virility were less a cause of *fitna* (social disorder) than women behaving freely and sporting their charms. The public space was the exclusive domain of men and it was accepted therefore that men had the right to renounce their manhood through effeminacy (*khinath*) or passive homosexuality (*ubna*), although these were seen as illnesses. Women on the other hand could not claim what was not theirs and their appearance in the public space came to be regarded as a greater threat to the social order.

The 'modernization' of society, from the second half of the nineteenth century on, implied the banishment of homosexuality from the recognized domains where it had been in evidence (even if illicitly), and the abandonment of a tolerance that was castigated by the Europeans as the 'Oriental vice' *par excellence* (whether with disdain by the British rulers or bemused curiosity by the French travellers).⁵⁹ In present-day Arab societies, sexuality has thus come to be 'normalized' in the most rigid way, albeit that the 'Western values' that are the supposed point of reference in the field of sexual ethics have in the West evolved tremendously. But governments and authorities, the media and certainly many writers – necessarily belonging to the 'conscious and educated minority' – feel that their 'educated man's burden' makes it a duty for them to denounce society's defects and corruption (among which homosexuality gets included) and that they should participate, through literature, in the sacred endeavour to reform it.

The irony is that even when this pervasive moralism asserts itself as an expression of Arabo-Islamic identity or *asala*, the moral values referred to are those the West produced but started to question profoundly from the 1960s on. It is quite predictable that critic Ghali Shukri's analysis of the crisis of sexuality in the Arabic novel⁶⁰ is totally mute on the subject of homosexuality: modern literature prioritizes men's relationships with *women* and the regulation of virility. The defence of equality between the two sexes and the advocacy of a normalized and 'sunder' sexual life between men and women, challenging the unlimited exercise of power by a dominating male, seems at face value irreconcilable with a sympathetic view of non-normative sexuality (or simply any type of *real* sexuality, for power and domination are almost necessary components of fantasy, whether heterosexual or homosexual: the particularity of male homosexuality being the confrontation of two supposedly dominant partners, as previously discussed *à propos* the Sa'dallah Wannus play).

Censorship is also a consequence of mass literacy. Nagib Mahfuz points to differences between classical and modern literature:

Classical Arabic *adab* was a literature of pleasant conversations at night with friends, and was restricted to private salons. There was no publisher nor media. Abu Nuwas, al-Husayn b. al-Dahhak and their boon-companions would sit together and recite verses. In [twentieth-century Egypt] we've had al-'Awadi al-Wakil and his circle composing even 'hotter' verses, but those are not published. These things did not disappear, but remained in private literary circles. All the [neo-]classical poets have verses in this genre, even Hafiz Ibrahim [. . .], but when poets collect

their *diwan*, they suppress such verses [. . .] The modern diffusion of works provokes self-censorship. [. . .] Publishers want the authors to respect public opinion and religious values.⁶¹

Novelist Hoda Barakat proposes another trail:

For a long time, the Arabic novel has dealt with the social condition, with the corruption of society, the loss of values, the exemplariness of a character in society. The character is an archetype, representing a social class, a group. One merely has to watch the morals of the Egyptian hero. Oh, does he suffer because of his morals! They are small prophets. The concern for the human condition is a relatively new phenomenon. Arabic literature now deals with the way man faces himself, not merely the way he faces society. This shift of perspective might open new fields of analysis of human sexuality.

One point remains, though: both classical and modern Arab societies have shared a common feeling that displaying one's inability to conform to standards or, worse, demanding a space of freedom to practise one's own moral standards, is a far greater offence than discreetly satisfying one's tastes in private. To this effect there is a *hadith* stating that the whole community will be forgiven except 'those who boast about deeds God has covered with his veil'.⁶² This is what Stephen O. Murray has rightly named 'the will not to know',⁶³ and it provides a clear reason for the lack of development of a gay movement comparable to what has appeared in the West: individuals want to know everything about other individuals, but society as a whole prefers not to see the *dissemination of desire*. Modern literature seems to accept the failure to lift this mask so that honour remains safe.

However, all societies need their own 'space of transgression', and the relative absence of homosexuality in the Arab literary field still needs to be studied. It is partly explainable by censorship and the close relationship between the act of writing and existing regimes and authorities in the region. As has been emphasized in this article, the current tendency in modern Arab societies of withdrawing behind an imagined Arabo-Islamic identity – which is mainly defined in terms of a rigid sexual ethics that necessarily condemns homoeroticism – is at odds with attempts to promote a cultural revival that would include the exploration and redefinition of all traditional values, including aesthetic and ethical ones. After all, a genuine endeavour of that kind would inevitably challenge the currently restricted conception of Arabo-Islamic identity. One can also pose the question of whether Arab

societies have not in fact started delegating the 'function of transgression' to the Western world, with which contact is nowadays ubiquitous: ridding themselves of the task of producing their own transgressions, and consuming imported versions, makes it all the easier to condemn what they consume as evidence of the 'moral failure' of the West when and if necessary.

Modern Arabic literature is starting to break the wall of silence and narratives increasingly include sexually explicit passages. But this opening cannot be completed unless it is accompanied by an unrestricted search of the universality and complexity of human sexuality, and a better knowledge of one's own culture. Self-doubt is a necessary step and the first attempts at questioning the old patterns of virility are central towards improving relationships between men and women. But what about relationships between men? The building of new standards should not ignore (and cannot erase) more obscure parts of human desire.

Notes

1. Some elements of this essay are based on my earlier article entitled 'Arabic literature', in George E. Haggerty & Bonnie Zimmerman, *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999) vol. 2. All translations of quotations from Arabic texts are my own unless otherwise indicated. I wish to thank Georgine Ayoub, Everett Rowson and Katia Zakharia for their countless suggestions in the course of writing this contribution.
2. 'Gender studies' and 'Gay and Lesbian studies' have mainly been concerned with the construction of a 'homosexual identity' in Western societies. Even research on sexual behaviour outside the West, such as Rudi C. Bley's *Geography of Perversion* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), focuses on the role of the 'ethnographic imagination' in the construction of a 'counter-model' to Western masculinity. Stephen O. Murray & Will Roscoe (eds.), *Islamic Homosexualities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) deals mainly with non-Arab societies and does not address diachronicity or the issue of cultural differences between Islamic societies.
3. See particularly Everett K. Rowson & J.W. Wright (eds.) *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also Arno Schmitt, *Bio-Bibliography of Male-Male Sexuality and Eroticism in Muslim Societies* (Berlin: Rosa Winkel Verlag, 1995); Arno Schmitt & Jehoeda Sofer, *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1992).
4. For instance Malek Chebel, *Encyclopédie de l'amour en Islam* (Paris: Payot, 1995), or by the same author, *L'esprit de sérail* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1988).

5. Concerning the frequent misuse of psychoanalytic concepts in this field, see Katia Zakharia, 'Usage des concepts psychoanalytiques dans l'étude du monde arabo-musulman: réflexion critique', in *Arabica*, vol. 42, 1995.
6. See Garay Menicucci, 'Unlocking the Arab celluloid closet: homosexuality in Egyptian film', in *Middle East Report*, 206, 1998 (special issue: 'Power and Sexuality in the Middle East').
7. Particularly Chahine's *Eskendereyya leh* and *Eskendereyya kaman we-kaman*.
8. Particularly Nasallah's *Mercedes*.
9. Gramophone 2-11099/100 in *Catalogue Général Disques Gramophone Arabes*, 1914.
10. *Junusiyya*, a neologism, was coined by Muhammad 'Umar Nahhas, in *al-Junusiyya, nahwa namudhaj li-tafsir al-junusiyya*, (Roermond, Netherlands: Maktab al-'Arabiyya, 1997). The author, giving new meanings to classical Arabic terms, betrays a superficial essentialist perspective in distinguishing *junusiyya* (homosexual identity), not necessarily implying intercourse, from *liwat* (homosexual intercourse). The sexual identity of the participants is thus disregarded, so allowing for 'substitution homosexuality'.
The history of the word *shudhudh* is still to be written. It is likely that the term's semantic field was narrowed to a homosexual connotation in the course of the twentieth century, but the first use of the compound *shudhudh jinsi* meaning homosexuality might go back to the nineteenth century. As for the use of *mithliyya*, it is still widely refused by the press, as recently witnessed in *al-Majalla's* sneering cover series of articles (24 October 1999) entitled 'The last catastrophe for Arabs in the twentieth century'.
11. For instance, Tunisian colloquial Arabic opposes *mibun*, passive homosexual, clearly derived from classical *ma'bun*, and *taffar* ('jumper', a rather positively connoted noun), a man who repeatedly seeks homosexual intercourse with young men and takes the active role. The term wouldn't apply to a heterosexual having one-time or occasional intercourse with other men and implies homosexual desire. Egyptian gay slang presents a similar pair of opposites with *kudyana* (passive partner) and *barghal*.
12. Yusuf Idris, *Hadithat sharaf* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 3rd edn., 1957), p. 83.
13. See C. Pellat's article, 'Liwat', in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).
14. See Bruce W. Dunne, 'Sexuality and the "civilizing process" in modern Egypt' (Washington, DC, Georgetown University: unpublished PhD dissertation, July 1996), pp. 185, 191.
15. See Everett K. Rowson, 'The categorization of gender and sexual irregularity in Medieval Arabic vice lists', in Julia Epstein & Kristina Straub (eds.), *Bodyguards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 50–79.
16. With the exception of Sa'dallah Wannus's *Tuqus al-isharat wa-l-tahawwulat*, discussed below.
17. Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d. 1023), *Akhlaq al-wazirayn* (The castigation of the

- two viziers) edited by Muhammad b. Tawit el-Tanji (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1992), p. 103: 'la tu 'awwil 'ala 'ayr fi sarawil ghayrika. la 'ayr illa 'ayr tamatta tahta 'anatika. fa-innaka in 'awwalta 'ala dhalika khanaka wa-shanaka wa-fadaha khanaka wa-manaka.'
18. Ahmad al-Tifashi, *Nuzhat al-albab fi ma la yujad fi kitab*, edited by Jamal Jum'a (London: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 1992); for a partial English translation from René Khawam's French translation, see Ahmad al-Tifashi, *The Delight of Hearts or What You Will Not Find in Any Book*, translated by Edward A. Lacey & Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1988).
19. We arbitrarily use the phrase 'modern Arabic literature' to refer to fiction written in the Arabic language from the last phase of the *Nabda* (renaissance), that is, the beginning of the twentieth century until the present. This article will deal, in particular, with the novel and the short story, although mention will also be made of plays.
20. Although a re-reading of Jibran Khalil Jibran's work could be attempted. His drawings and some writings such as *The Madman* could indicate a homoerotic sensibility.
21. Although originally a separate work when published in 1950, the text was finally included in the *al-Ayyam* ensemble as a third part.
22. Poets from the tribe of Bani 'Udhra and their imitators of the seventh century are reputed, according to literary historiography, to love and die of passion for a single woman they never manage to reach.
23. Jamil and Kuthayyir were famous chaste poets of the seventh century.
24. A *Nuwasi* is a follower of the poet, Abu Nuwas.
25. The verses are reputed to have been written on a column in the great mosque of Basra: see Abu Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967), *Kitab al-Aghani* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1st edn. 1995; 8th edn. 1990), vol. 20, p. 196.
26. A famous cafe in Cairo, now mainly a touristic spot, but in the 1950s one of the city's literary salons, frequented by Mahfuz.
27. Personal interview with Nagib Mahfuz, 8 August 1998.
28. Nagib Mahfuz's Cairo trilogy was first published by Maktabat Misr, Cairo. The English version of the trilogy was translated by William Maynard Hutchins & Olive E. Kenny, *Palace Walk* vol. 1, 1990; *Palace of Desire* vol. 2, 1991; and *Sugar Street* vol. 3, 1992 (New York: Doubleday by arrangement with the American University of Cairo Press, Cairo).
29. Nagib Mahfuz, *Malhamat al-harafish* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1977) was published in English as *The Harafish*, translated by Catherine Cobham (New York: Doubleday, 1995). For the episode described, see in the Arabic edition the chapter 'Qurrat 'ayni', pp. 259–320.
30. 'hunaka ahad min al-harafish usiba min dimn inhidarihi bi-l-shudhudh': personal interview with Nagib Mahfuz, 8 August 1998.
31. In Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *Akhlaq al-wazirayn* (The castigation of the two viziers).

32. Gamal al-Ghitani, *Waqa'i' barat al-Za'farani* (Cairo, 1975; al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab reprint, 1994), pp. 43–45.
33. The Hammam al-Ahrar is a made-up name, but the author's mention of Amir al-Guyush Street a few lines before makes it clear that the popular hammam in that street famous for its homosexual atmosphere is the reference for Ghitani's novel.
34. Al-Isfahani's *Kitab al-Aghani* reports that the Umayyad poet al-Ahwas was caught in the caliph's kitchen trying to convince the young aides to sodomize him, and al-Tifashi's *Nuzhat al-Albab* mentions many anecdotes in which a rich man is obsessed with soldiers or grooms.
35. al-Ghitani, *Waqa'i' barat al-Za'farani*, p. 98.
36. al-Tawhidi, *Akhlaq al-wazirayn*, p. 374.
37. Ra'uf Mus'ad, *Baydat al-Na'ama* (London: Riad el-Rayyes, 1994), pp. 210–11.
38. Sa'dallah Wannus, *Tuqus al isharat wa-l-tabawwulat* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1994).
39. *Ibid.*, Act II, scene 3, pp. 85–90.
40. From the collection *Bab al-Tawfiq* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1994), pp. 87–94.
41. This use of *double-entendre* might also be compared to the coy and dated allusions to homosexuality one would find in classic Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s.
42. Hoda Barakat, *Hajar al-dahik* (Beirut, 1990; London: Riyad el-Rayyes, 1991); published in English as Hoda Barakat, *The Laughing Stone*, translated by Sophie Bennett (Washington, DC: Interlink, 1995; paperback edn., 1998).
43. Barakat, *Hajar al-dahik*, p.17.
44. Allusion to the Quran (12, 31), from the Marmaduke Mohammed Pickthall translation (1st edn.: London, 1938), pp. 137–38: 'And when she heard of their [the women of the town] sly talk, she sent to them and prepared for them a cushioned couch [to lie on at the feast] and gave to every one of them a knife [to peel an orange] and said [to Joseph]: Come out unto them! And when they saw him they exalted him and cut their hands [losing their grip on themselves and unable to peel their oranges], exclaiming: God Blameless! This is not a human being. This is no other than some gracious angel.' *and* (12, 25): 'And they raced with one another to the door, and she tore his shirt from behind.' Khalil portrays himself as Zulaykha, tears a metaphoric shirt but remains unnoticed, and cuts his hands like the women of Memphis did, while the biblical/Quranic figure calmly peeled her orange.
45. This novel was written in 1972, published for the first time in Arabic in Casablanca, then by Dar al-Saqi, London, in 1982. The English *For Bread Alone* was translated by Paul Bowles and first published in 1973 by Peter Owen, London.
46. Choukri, *al Khubz al-hafi*, chapter 8, pp. 103–15.
47. This 'misuse' of the classical Arabic word *luti* is pervasive in modern Arabic, where it has become an equivalent of 'homosexual' as an identity. Although oral sex is almost never mentioned in classical sources, the narrator is the closest of the two to the medieval conception of *luti*.
48. In a fourth scene (chapter 4, pp. 65–67), the narrator has become a rapist in his turn and forces a young boy to have sex with him. He has genuine desire for him and even touches the other boy's 'thing' and makes him come. But when the boy complains to his parents, and the narrator's aunt accuses him, he makes it clear that although he loves what is 'dirty and delicious', he has chosen a boy because women are unavailable. Homosexual desire is not denied, but it is a 'second-hand' desire.
49. This scene should be linked to such films as *Rib al-Sedd* (1986) and *Bizness* (1992), both by the Tunisian Director Nouri Bouzid. In the first film, Farfat's homosexuality is neither a genetic feature nor a choice, but a consequence of the character's rape as a youth by the carpenter for whom he was an apprentice. In the second film, 'sex-tourists' are taking advantage of deprived youth and induce adolescents into male prostitution.
50. First published in Arabic in 1966. First published in English as *Season of Migration to the North* (London: Heinemann, 1969; republished in paperback by Quartet Books, 1980).
51. In Gamal al-Ghitani, *Risalat al-basa'ir fi al-masa'ir* (Cairo: Madbuli, 1991; 1st edn., 1989).
52. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
53. Sun'allah Ibrahim, *Sharaf* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1997), p. 19.
54. Sun'allah Ibrahim, *Tilka al-ra'iba* (Cairo: Dar Shahdi, 1986; 1st edn., 1966), pp. 26–27.
55. Stephan Guth, 'The function of sexual passages in some Egyptian novels of the 1980s', in R. Allen, H. Kirkpatrick, E. de Moor (eds.), *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1995), p. 129.
56. The subject of this article being 'Arabic literature', and as our understanding of this notion implies we should limit ourselves to works written in the Arabic tongue, we shall not deal with homosexuality mentioned by Arab authors writing in French or English. But their freedom of speech, their earnest and direct approach to their sexual preferences (see in French, novels by Rachid O., or in English Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaidis*) suggest that those authors feel Arabic cannot convey such freedom. One should, however, establish whether the reluctance to use Arabic is simply a tactical choice by writers who legitimately want to be read and not ostracized, or if a traumatic relationship with Arabic does explain this abstinence.
57. Dunne, 'Sexuality and the "civilizing process" in modern Egypt'.
58. Under the entry kh/w/l in the *Lisan al-'Arab*, one finds that *khawal* means 'al-'abid wa-l-ima' wa-ghayruhum min al-hashiya, al-wahid wa-l-jam' wa-l-mudhakkar wa-l-mu'annath fi dhalika sawa'un' ('male and female slaves as well as other types of servants, the word is used for singular and plural,

masculine and feminine'). Ibn Manzur (1232-1311), although never really concerned by diachronicity, seems to imply that the term is in fairly common use in his time. Since he was Egyptian and lived in Cairo and in Tripoli (Libya), we can suppose that in the fourteenth century the word had not yet gained its homosexual meaning. It is likely that nineteenth-century colloquial usage of *khawal* derives from classical Arabic, since *ghilman* (young male servants) were also quite often used for sexual gratification by their masters. But the precise connection between the thirteenth-century servants and the nineteenth-century female impersonators is unknown in its details. Progress in this field demands study of the vocabulary of late Mamluk and Ottoman texts. In its modern use, however, *khawal* is simply derogatory slang for 'queer'.

59. See Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient* (Paris: Charpentier, 1851) for a vivid account of a show given by 'khowals' (sic): also quoted in Jean-Claude Berchet, *Le Voyage en Orient* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985), pp. 879-81. See, too, Well Lane's classic description, in *The Manners and Customs of Modern Egypt* (London: 1836), ch. 19.
60. Ghali Shukri, *Azmat al-jins fi l-qissa al-'arabiyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1991; 1st edn., 1962).
61. Personal interview with Nagib Mahfuz, 8 August 1998.
62. This *hadith* is found in the *Sahih* of Muslim, 5306: 'haddathani Zuhayr b. Harb wa-Muhammad b. Hatim wa-'Abd b. Humayd [. . .] sami'tu Aba Hurayra yaqulu: sami'tu rasula Allah Salla Allahu 'alayhi wa-sallama yaqulu kullu ummati mu'afatun illa l-mujahirina wa-inna min al-ijhari an ya'mala l-'abdu bi-l-layli 'amalan thumma yusbihu wa-qad satarahu rabbuhu fa-yaqulu ya fulan qad 'amiltu l-barjihata kadha wa-kadha wa-qad bata yasturuhu rabbuhu wa-yusbihu yakshifu sitr Allah 'anhu.'
63. Murray & Roscoe (eds.), *Islamic Homosexualities*, pp. 14-54.

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