

**REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY
IN LITERATURE OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD**

by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis seeks to uncover issues in sexuality of the Islamic world through literature. The questions I asked sought to understand how gender and sexuality was and is viewed in the Arabo-Islamic. I wanted to compare the factors that regulate sexual order in these societies. Some of the issues under investigation were genital cutting in women, honor killing, hegemonic and complicit masculinity, and gender bender sexuality. My methodology in studying this literature included the use of literature reviews, medical accounts and data, journalistic accounts, and sociological writings. I chose to use an interdisciplinary approach to help me see the issues in gender and sexuality on multiple levels of cultural and religious beliefs as well as social hierarchies. In the end of my study, I found that many issues under investigation had powerful and complex forces regulating ideas and practices. These forces were present as political, social, and cultural ideas systems that subjected both men and women. In conclusion, sexual order seems to be tense in these societies and is often on the verge of violence.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO ARABIC/ISLAMIC LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

Arabic/Islamic literature and culture in the West have made themselves known since the *Arabian Nights*. However, recent images of the Middle East in the Western consciousness have come to represent stereotyped images of Muslims as fanatics and Islam as an oppressive religion that subjugates women's rights. In a way, the Western mind has once again constructed an "Occidental" perspective towards the Middle East, thus rendering the diverse civilization into a controllable notion that here can be equated with the "Orient"¹. As Edward Said mentions in his book *Orientalism*

"For orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, us) and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"). Page 43

While Said spoke of the West as Europe primarily, I equate the West here as the United States to differentiate between Said's "Occidental" and my Occidental. Said spoke of the Orientalist reality as antihuman and persistent, something that persists in the Western cognizance even today in the form of Islam as an oppressive and violent religion¹. Though this thought was first published in 1978 in his book, *Orientalism*, his idea about the persistent and antihuman reality remains true to this

¹Idea of Occidental and Orient borrowed from Edward Said's *Orientalism*

day. In order to break this “Western reality”, the Western reader must be willing to give voice to the peoples of the Islamic world, not to the media or global representations. However, my purpose is not to “form a thought for dealing with the foreign” or to “channel thoughts [and practices] into East to West categories” (Said 44). Rather, my purpose lies in forging a means of understanding for the Western reader so they can experience the Islamic world as it really is, through the voices of its own peoples. This can be done by studying literatures emanating from the Arabic world. For readers like me who are not able to read Arabic, our quest takes the path through Arabic works in translation or literature of the Arab world written in English. The purpose for undertaking such a study belies in my thesis itself which is to dispel the myths of violence and oppression while acknowledging the rich cultural and literary heritage of one of the oldest civilizations on Earth. The resolution in studying these works rests in the facts of dissipating the “otherness” of a culture and reveling in the literary delights of the Arab/Islamic world. To dispel the “otherness” of the East, even though the “otherness” is no longer defined by the exotic but rather the violence and political unrest is a key goal here. I too have like Roger Allen sought to identify particular lenses through which the West viewed the Middle East, for the sake of identifying the limitations imposed (46). Thus, the purpose for reading translated Arabic/Islamic literature for the Western reader holds open the possibility for genuine dialogues where images of media perpetuated oppressiveness are not omnipresent.

I chose literatures from the Middle East and North Africa because these regions were the cradle in which religion and culture flourished (Allen 10). The literatures will explore themes through the works of a bevy of diverse writers who will

help establish cultural contexts to practices that are largely unknown to the Western culture, such as female genital mutilation (Chapter 3) and honor killing (Chapter 5).

The term Arab/Islamic literature here is used together to define the corpus of literature that largely stems from the Arab world with Islamic roots. The reason I stress on the differentiation is because Islam does not dictate the literature represented here, neither do the authors here strive for achieving religious purposes. However, the Arab culture has been largely influenced by Islam in its politics, culture, law, and daily life. Hence, the characters represented in these works have an Islamic background and culture. This does make the works solely Arabic or Islamic since the literature itself is diverse and originates from North African countries such as Egypt and Sudan to Turkey in the Middle East. The primary languages of these regions are Arabic (with the exception of Turkey) and the culture is largely Islamic too, hence I have classified the literature as Arabic/Islamic literature.

The texts have been arranged in a thematic fashion for the readers ease. The arrangement of the chapters itself define how sexuality and gender dynamics are viewed in the thesis. Sexuality and gender dynamics in this body of works have been defined into three parts, i.e. sexuality in the medieval times {*Thousand and One Nights*}, modern sexualities {feminist writing and genital cutting, variant masculinities and honor killing}, and divergent sexuality {gender bender}. These three sections explore different aspects of sexuality in men and women in varying spaces, times, social expectations and cultures.

The second chapter titled “Gender dynamics in the *Thousand and One Nights*” is a distinct category in itself because the chapter is meant to explore themes of identity and representation in men and women of medieval times. This study has been

included to form a comparative chapter between sexuality and gender dynamics of medieval times with current times and the comparative study itself is by no means a central part of the discourse. Rather, this chapter helps us contrast how society's approach to sexuality and gender have changed over time. The distinctions between *Arabian Nights* and the contemporary works raise questions such as "Was life better in the medieval Islamic era where women had more freedom with their bodies and talk about sexuality was not taboo?" Other questions that address the issue of fairness in the treatment of sexes and representation of sexuality are also raised up with this study. Selected stories have been chosen based on their appropriate themes.

Since *Arabian Nights* tend to have repetition as a key storytelling element, important themes are also repeated since the stories were shared via oral transmission before the advent of writing. Thus, the repetitive element resolves the issue of narrowing down stories from the *Arabian Nights* as most stories repeat key elements in terms of theme or plot. For logic's sake, I have selected key stories from the 1000 nights that depict how society treated women, the gender dynamics between men and woman, and lastly, how sexuality was viewed.

The second part where the discourse on gender and sexuality takes place is further spilt into two parts, i.e., female sexuality and male sexuality. The purpose of these chapters is to emphasize the issues present in each sexuality/gender, thereby dispelling the traditional notions of women being victims and men being oppressors. In chapter 3, I have focused on the feminist discourse of female genital cutting which I hope will create cultural relevancy and raise sensitivity to an issue that has ethical and health concerns to women. I studied this practice as a way to define how femininity is viewed both by women and men. In this study, I first focus on the medical

repercussions and cultural forces that drive this practice. This chapter meshes the social sciences study with medical science findings as well as literature. The observations of the sciences are humanized in the writings of Egyptian, feminist writers, Nawal El Saadawi and Alifa Rifaat who present the cultural contexts as well as the psychological effects of these practices. Coupled with these feminist writings is the work of Sudanese male writer, Tayeb Salih whose book *Season of migration to the North* provides an interesting insight in cultural notions of beauty, femininity, and female sexuality as relevant to genital cutting.

Moreover, the other half of the discourse is devoted to exploring male sexuality in its variant masculinities (Chapter 4) and the violent aspects of male identity (Chapter 5). The discussion on masculinities in chapter 4 begins with the introduction of variant masculinities where terms such as hegemonic and subordinate/marginalized masculinities are defined and discussed in the sociological framework. Here, interactions and subjugations of masculinity in the patriarchal structure as well as in the domestic sphere are studied to explore the expectations and rules that regulate masculinity. The sociological discussion is supported with a literary discourse on male characters and their interactions in the works of Naquib Mahfouz (*Palace Walk*- part of the Cairo trilogy) and Yasmina Khadra (*Swallows of Kabul*). The literature helps establish that manhood and masculinity are relative terms and value different things in different cultures. This will hopefully provide insight {although a limited one} into the lives of Middle Eastern men through their cultural lens and not the Orientalist lens that the West is very much accustomed to.

The other half of the study on masculinities deals with the violent aspect of male sexuality. The study on honor killing (Chapter 5) is a step to open up the

discourse on an issue of violence against women that often only sees women as victims and men as aggressors. I hope that through the chapter on honor killing, I have shed light on external forces that modulate male sexuality and make demands that are often cruel in its expectations. This dialogue make use of journalistic accounts and data by Unni Walker and Ayşe Önal along with narratives by Turkish author, Elif Shafak (*Honor: A Novel*) and Souad, author of (*Burned Alive*). My sincerest wish is that through this chapter, readers will understand that sexualities of men and women have societal and cultural constraints on them that regulate the behaviors expected from each, thereby, making both men and women victims in the larger structure.

Lastly, the third part of the thesis is reserved for the chapter that perhaps does not fit in with male or female sexuality. The last chapter stands alone to prove that unconventional sexuality has no place in traditional terms of gender dynamics and sexuality, and hence, has to establish its own place. This chapter through the work of Tayeb Salih, author of *The Sand Child* seeks to understand the challenges placed upon the male and female sexuality and how these challenges are dealt with when the sexualities cross over, thereby, forming a distinct gender dynamic and sexuality. This chapter is the place where divergent and unconventional sexualities come together. As the title aptly suggests, this work explores “gender bender” sexualities.

Lastly, the works represented in the thesis are an attempt to capture the unrestrained diversity of the Arab/Islamic world. The diversity of the works established themselves in the times, regions, and languages they were originally written in such as Arabic, French, and Turkish. While the literatures are paired up with similar themes to establish a coherence, the fiction studied here is by no means a complete picture of the richness of literary collection waiting to be discovered. Rather,

my thesis positions itself as an introductory attempt to recognize and discuss the various discourses of the Arab/Islamic world. By introducing and tapping the discussions that reveal the concerns of the Arab/Islamic world, readers will be able to join in the discussions themselves at the global level.

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Chapter 2

GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

Introduction of The Thousand and One Nights

According to renowned Arabic literature specialist Roger Allen from University of Pennsylvania, many Western readers are exposed to Arabic literature in some form of the *Thousand and One Nights*² or also known popularly as *The Arabian Nights* (Allen 201). The monument of work that has fascinated the Western world since the inception of Orientalism had also found its way in Disney's popular productions of Aladdin thus spreading the fascination with the tales even in children. The corpus of work undoubtedly held an unwavering fascination over the Western world. However, the same work was nowhere as significant to the Eastern world, in fact, the work was never considered as literature by the Arabs themselves (201). What is one to make of such a situation where a culture [Middle East] has supposedly severed the linkages with its own cultural artifacts?

This question can best be answered through the reading experiences of a young Orhan Pamuk who when reading *The Arabian Nights* for the first time as a child could imagine the names of the characters to be similar to names of people in Istanbul but otherwise could not identify with the foreign land in the tales. The disconnect with reality of the Middle East or rather the construct of a fantasy land served to confound

² The title Arabian Nights and The thousand and One Nights are used interchangeably by the author

even readers such as Pamuk who despite being from Istanbul could not quite relate either with the place or the events (Pamuk 1). The result was that the land of the *Arabian Nights* came to signify a world that was “alien and faraway” at once “more primitive and yet enchanted” (1). Thus, it is plausible to understand why the Middle Eastern culture had never claimed *The Thousand and One Nights* as an artifact of their cultural heritage. However, this lack of claim brings to light another conundrum which is why was the West so eager to insist on identifying the tales with the Middle East and what were the subsequent implications.

Perhaps this can be explained in terms of ideology where the Occident has in Michael Ryan’s³ term imposed on the Oriental or Middle Eastern world “frames of understanding and perception that prevent the true nature of [Middle Eastern/Oriental⁴] society from being seen and discussed (Ryan 40). The resulting “mistaken cognition” or distorted reality gave the Occident an ability to construct an identity for the Middle East thus contributing to the Orientalist views that were already in place (40). This view of mistaken cognition is supported by Roger Allen as well who continues that the inclusion of tales from the collection of the Arabian Nights into anthologies of world literature have “succeeded to a large degree in blocking any further interest in searching for other examples of literature written in Arabic” (Allen 201-202). Thus the result was that *The Arabian Nights* came to be the window through which the Western audience could both view and deconstruct the East. Moreover, the aura surrounding the tales pushed the work onto the world’s stage where it received

³ Michael Ryan is a professor of Film and Media Arts at Temple University

⁴ The terms Middle East and Oriental are used synonymously to take into account the long standing view of the Western world of the East.

worldwide fame. Undoubtedly, the translations and liberal additions of tales by European travelers such as Antoine Galland and Richard Burton also helped make a case for *The Arabian Nights* receiving immense interest and attention in the West (Pamuk 1). Coming back to the arguments of Allen and Ryan, the result was that *The Arabian Nights* came to be equated with the Middle East, not taking into account that the collection of tales were an amalgamation of stories from the cultures of “India, Arabia and Iran [and even Turkey]” (1). Thus, *The Arabian Nights* are not completely “Arabian”.

The Arabian Nights in the context of Islamic literature

The *Arabian Nights* have been included as a comparative study of gender and sexuality in literature of the medieval and contemporary times. The stories are an apt choice because they help us in examining the kinds of relations and gender dynamics that were in place. Moreover, the tales are not only bawdy but at times very frank in their representations of sexuality. The stories I will be discussing will examine the gender dynamics in heterosexual relations as well the portrayals of sexuality. The tales I have selected for my analysis are the frame story of “King Shahrayar and Shahrazad”, “The Story of the Half Petrified Prince”, “Aziz and Aziza”, and “The story of King Shahrman and his son, Qamar –al Zaman”. The tales themselves are tales within tales, hence, they will share repetitive elements to suit the narrator’s (Shahrazad) purpose.

Portrayals of gender and sexuality in the tale of King Shahrayar and Shahrazad NB

The widely known frame story of “King Shahrayar and Shahrazad” sets the tone for the subsequent stories that follow regarding the dynamics of relationships

between men and women. In the frame story, readers are made aware of the betrayal that Shahrayar experiences when he finds his wife defiling their marriage bed with a slave (Lyons 4-6). Both offenders are put to death promptly. As fate would decree, Shahrayar's brother, Shahzaman had experienced a similar situation. Both brothers in shock from being cuckolded set out on a journey to find a man sharing their own fate. Their quest leads them to a place near a sea where the brothers are forced to cuckold a jinni who locks his beautiful wife away. However, the woman manages to get out once her husband is asleep and coerces the kings to have sex with her. Refusal to do so means they would risk a cruel and painful death at the hands of her husband. Hence, in order to save their lives, both men are forced to comply with the woman. She then proceeds to collect their rings and reveals a collection of 570 signet rings signifying the number of times she has successfully cheated on her husband.

The above events establishes few themes that are repeated in most stories which are fear of women's sexuality and the portrayal of women as untrustworthy which is compounded by the behavior demonstrated by the wives of the two kings and the *jinni*. Additionally, the fear of female sexuality is manifested through depicting them as adulteresses who due to their immense sexual appetite are unable to be satisfied by one man. These representations are echoed in contemporary literature where men control women out of fear for their sexuality and equate women as fitna⁵. Women are also shown to be cunning sorceresses skillful in the art of deception. This

⁵Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi defines fitna as the belief that women's sexuality is dangerous and can cause destruction to the social order in the world leading to chaos, hence, the fitna or the sexuality of women must be strictly controlled. *Arabian Nights* plays on this Islamic concept of fitna without the context of Islam.

image too is a manifestation of male fear because it exploits the idea innocent men who are prone to falling into women's guiles such as happens with Shahrazad who thinks his wife to be innocent until he witnesses otherwise. Conversely, men are shown to lack the sophistication required to be cunning but instead are prone to bouts of violence, irrational temper, and dangerous curiosities.

For instance, Shahrayar has his offending wife promptly executed with her lover. The prompt corporeal punishment due to infidelity is a recurring feature in the tales signifying that men will only love as long as their partners are faithful, any breach on their partner's part concerning fidelity will result in violence despite previous promises of unwavering and passionate love. Moreover, it was Shahrayar's curiosity to find a man sharing his fate that leads him to be raped by the *jinni's* wife. However, this coercion is not stated explicitly as rape in the tales. Rather, the action is presented as a proof of women's sexual appetite. Most importantly, the events following his curious exploration lead him into a morally spiraling path because he decides that all women are unfaithful.

Furthermore, with this view of sexuality in place, women are shown to be aggressors and initiators in sexual relationships. From a twenty first century Western perspective, the gender roles are completely reversed in this encounter in *The Arabian Nights*. Hence, *The Arabian Nights* served as a literary predecessor to contemporary Arabic/Islamic literature which capitalized on male fear of female sexuality which is then shown to be rigidly controlled through restrictions on clothing, action, space, and even women's bodies in contemporary literature.

The aforementioned themes are presented in a cyclical fashion through the subsequent stories. However, the themes are presented in a manner where characters

respond and challenge the portrayals of their genders. For instance, in the frame story, Shahrayar responds and challenges the weak portrayal of his sex by exercising his authority as a patriarch. After he safely returns home, he starts the fatal chain of events where he marries a beautiful virgin each night, consummates the marriage, and has her beheaded the subsequent morning. By doing this, he becomes the controlling factor in the equation of a heterosexual relationship with the power to control his partner's sexual actions and life. He also becomes the aggressor who preys on innocent virgins, thus, reversing the previous two situations where women previously had controlled him sexually. He challenges the women who cuckold and control men by using his power as a king to marry any beautiful woman and then having her killed. His actions confirm the types of relations that follow in subsequent stories between men and women, where relations are fraught with tensions, suspicions, and a battle for control over the other person.

Furthermore, *The Arabian Nights* lays bare the insecurities, jealousies, deceptions, unbridled curiosity, and the quest for power over a partner very plainly. The depiction of women in the stories might seem misogynistic at a cursory glance but the decree on men is not favorable either. The tales are harshly candid about Shahrayar's blatant flaws such as his reduction of conjugal love into lust and his use of his wife's infidelity as an excuse to be "recurrently and corruptly unfaithful himself" (Heath 18). Though the verdict on both genders are severe as the tales highlight the selfishness and at times utter foolishness of lovers, the tales do have a lofty theme too. Just like Shahrayar's violence on women was a challenge to his previous experiences with women, Shahrazad too challenges Shahrayar's misconceptions by choosing to willingly place herself in danger all the while redeeming other women by revealing

that women's intelligence and trickery do have noble purposes as well, such as saving lives. Shahrazad uses her beauty to charm and marry the king and uses her intelligence to keep the loveless king from killing her by "entrancing him with stories" that are always left unfinished at their climax on the dawn of the day, thereby, forcing the king to keep his wife alive for another day to hear the complete story. She also employs her sister, Dunyazad to participate in her craftiness by having Dunyazad prompt her for more stories to incite Shahrayar's curiosity.

The themes in other stories

The Story of the Semi-Petrified Prince tells the account of a man who upon a genie's advice presents a sultan with fishes that are of four different colors. The fishes are given to the royal cook who tries to fry them but is unable to do so as the fishes come alive and start speaking to a woman who appears out of nowhere. This event intrigues the sultan who then orders the fisherman to take him to the pond. Upon wandering, the sultan finds a palace where a beautiful man lies lamenting. The cause of his grief is his lower body which is made out of stone. He proceeds to tell the sultan that the fishes are his subjects and he himself used to be a king happily married to his cousin. The king proceeds to recount how one day he overheard his servants talking about his wife drugging him every night by means of sorcery and sneaking off to be with another man. Upon investigating, he finds his wife to be in love with a slave who is suffering from leprosy. In his anger, he grievously injures the slave when his wife is not there. For two years, both husband and wife keep up the pretense of a happy marriage and when the limits of the king's patience is over, he confronts his wife bitterly. Before he can kill her, his wife turns half of him into stone and whips him with lashes every day, covers him with a hair shirt and a robe, thus adding to his

physical misery. The sultan pitying the king promises to help him out and manages to successfully trick the sorceress to undo the spell thus causing the king to be restored to his former state. The sorceress is then cut in half as punishment for her wickedness.

The above tale has parallels with Shahrayar's own experiences in his marriage before he sets out on the murderous path of vendetta. Shahrayar's fears about women are reflected in this tale that Shahrazad relays to him. The parallelism of cheating wives in the frame story and in this subsequent tale reflects "the powerful expression of the potent fear entertained by men of that era: that women might abandon them, cuckold them, and condemn them to solitude" (Pamuk 3). In conjunction with these fears and insecurity also lies men's desire to be loved wholeheartedly by their wives, such as was in the case of Shahrayar and the king.

However, love in *The Arabian Nights* tends to be selfish because partners tend to be unforgiving. Love itself is unpredictable in the stories because it has a strong likelihood of turning into hate. The punishment for infidelity carries the danger of not only the termination of the relationship but also the destruction of the offender to wipe out all traces of the existence of the relationship. Love in *The Arabian Nights* comes saddled with violence, either against oneself or against another person. The nature of love is volatile, subject to wavering upon fate's discretion. *The Arabian Nights* do not seem to pronounce moral judgments, instead they aim to simply narrate. Though the stories have been termed as love stories with happy endings, the narratives have many dark themes inherent in them of abuse and power control. Thus, despite the presence of love, men and women seem to be on different planes and only rarely come together in love and peace.

Conversely, there is a happy exception to the depictions of love and women in the tale of *Aziz and Aziza* that serves to form the antithesis to previous representations of women and love. In the tale, Shahrazad carefully juxtaposes two images of women who are polar opposites to reflect men's fear about women but also their desire to form loving and understanding relationships with women. As an astute woman herself, Shahrazad calculatedly does not reveal this story to Shahrayar until the hundredth and twelfth night because she had used her narrative prowess to build up this moment where she could broach topics of fidelity and women together in a positive light. Aziz and Aziza tells the account of two cousins engaged to be married. Aziza is madly in love with Aziz and remains faithful in love even beyond death. However, fate intervenes on the day of the marriage and Aziz wanders off in search of a friend to invite him to his wedding. His wandering leads him to an unfamiliar lane where he sees a beautiful woman and falls in love with her. She makes some cryptic gestures at him which he does not understand. On reaching home, he relays to Aziza all that had happened and she understanding the meaning of the signals in all honestly interprets them for Aziz and helps him gain his love all the while wasting away from pining for him. Aziz does not realize the value of Aziza's love neither the immense loss of her death. When his lover finds out about Aziza's death, she plans to kill him but before she can do so, he recites the poetry that Aziza had taught him. This action is enough to stop her from killing him and she warns him to be careful about women as they are dishonest. Aziz continues in his ways and in one of his drunken stupors he is tricked by an old lady to enter the house whereupon he is forced to marry a young woman there. The condition of his wife is that he is to leave the house only a year from that day and when he does he is to come back straight home. Nevertheless, when the year

is over, instead of going home, he visits his ex-mistress who flies into rage on seeing him and wants to murder him. He is able to save himself by reciting the poetry that Aziza had asked him to recite before she had died which saves him from death again but not from the physical punishment that follows. As a lesson for his infidelity to both his lover and Aziza, his mistress castrates him and sends him back home. When his wife discovers the loss of his manhood, she throws him out into the streets claiming he is of no use to her anymore. Having been rejected by both mistress and wife, he realizes the value of Aziza's true love and the unwavering fidelity for him.

The above story portrays three shades of women. The first one is the most ideal and sought after, reminiscent of Shahrazad in the form of Aziza who is clever and faithful. Not only does she decode the riddles for Aziz but she also uses her intelligence to help the man she loves gain his love and protect him from danger. In Shahrazad's case, she uses her intelligence not only to save herself and other women in the kingdom but also to save the king from his own madness. Through her stories, Shahrazad establishes what constitutes moral actions and instructs Shahrayar about what it means to be tested by fate and to pass the test which he was already in the process of failing (Heath 18). Similarly, Aziza helps Aziz distinguish between love and lust through her actions. Unlike Shahrayar, Aziz not only fails the test of fate but also loses his Aziza (beloved⁶).

In contrast with Aziza's sacrificial love, Aziz's mistress tries to murder him twice but Aziza's intervention even in death through her poetry saves Aziz. Instead, his mistress marks him permanently and abandons him. Moreover, his wife too turns

⁶ The names Aziz and Aziza mean beloved in Arabic

him away. These actions of betrayal and abandonment are reminiscent of male fears discussed earlier that plagued Shahrayar. In addition, these fears came true when Aziz wanders off into the unknown like Shahrayar. The curiosity that motivates the wandering or even happenstance meandering as was in Aziz's case symbolizes deviation from the path one is supposed to be walking on. Hence, men are portrayed not only being prone to be easily deceived but also unable to stay on the right path.

Likewise, the significance of the wandering man is repeated in the story of prince Qamar and princess Budur where love takes on a different shade and sexuality is manifested in novel ways. Both Qamar and Budur are beautiful youngsters averse to the idea of marriage. Due to an intervention at the fate of *jinni's* hands, Budur is brought from her far away home to Qamar who had been locked into the attic as a punishment for his insolence in repeatedly refusing his father for his marriage. On awakening next to the lovely Budur who had been put on an enchanted sleep by the *jinns*, Qamar finds himself in love with her thinking his father had put her next to him as a temptation. Hence, he resists the urge to kiss her and instead exchanges rings with her promising to marry her the very next morning. Next, he too is put on an enchanted sleep by the *jinns* and this time Budur awakens to find the beautiful Qamar next to her. Not realizing that she is far away from home, she too thinks Qamar is an enticement by her father for her marriage. Unlike Qamar who was patient, she repeatedly tries to awaken him to consummate their relationship and upon failing to do so instead unbuttons his shirt and fulfills her lust by touching him. By dawn, the *jinns* take Budur back to her father's place and upon waking up, both lovers ask their servants about their respective partners. Upon not getting the answer they wanted, both Budur and Qamar torture their respective servants to the point of death. For five years, both

lovers pine away for each other and in a strange turn of events, they find themselves reunited once more and marry each other. Having spent two months away from his old father, Qamar decides to return to his lands with Budur. On the way in their journey, Qamar wanted to become intimate with Budur and finding her fast asleep, he lifts up her shirt to find a ring attached to her underwear. Curiosity strikes him and he takes hold of the ring which in turn is taken away by a bird that flies away with it. Qamar too chases the bird and ends up in the land of the Magians where his escape would not be possible for a year since the ships come there annually. Meanwhile, Budur on finding herself alone realizes the danger in the situation and hence, dresses as Qamar and commands the caravan to proceed in the hopes of finding her husband. Budur for her part ends up on the Ebony islands where the old King Aramanus requests her to marry his daughter, Hayat al Nufus without realizing that Budur too is a woman masquerading as a man. Budur once again finds herself obliged to keep up her pretense of being a man to save herself from danger. To avoid consummating the marriage, Budur pretends to be in deep prayer for two days much to the dismay of her wife and father in law. Hayat warns Budur about the danger awaiting Budur if she does not consummate the marriage to which Budur confesses her identity. Hayat for her part saves Budur by staining her clothes with the blood of a pigeon to prove she has been deflowered. Next, both Budur and Hayat “played with each other exchanging embraces and kisses” despite knowing the truth of the other person (755). In the meanwhile, another turn of events puts her face to face with her husband. She employs Qamar in her service without revealing her true identity and promotes him to higher ranks promptly leading him to suspect that the “king” wanted sexual favors from him. Qamar tries to resign from his position but finally relents to a sexual encounter with

the “king” in order to “fix him”. Qamar finds himself with the king and becomes fearful and embarrassed to the point of shedding tears. Meanwhile, Budur still pretending to be a king coerces Qamar to touch her upon which he she reveals her true identity to him. The next day, Budur confesses to King Aramanus and Hayat is married off to Qamar. Soon enough, both women conceive and times passes by with their two grown sons. However, both Budur and Hayat have incestuous desires for their step sons and both women proposition their step sons respectively only to be rejected by them. Afraid that their husband will find out their truth, both women accuse their step sons of trying to rape them. Both the sons are sentenced to death but fate intervenes and they are saved unbeknownst to their father. While in the end their innocence is proved, the punishment for both Budur and Hayat is never revealed.

This tale once again comes back to the theme of the unfaithful wife, only this time, the wife has displayed bisexual traits by demonstrating lust for both a woman and men. Moreover, the unfaithful wife, especially Budur has the greater power in the relationship. For one, she fondles a sleeping Qamar the first time she sees him, thereby satisfying her lust. Even after they are married and separated by chance, she willingly chooses to act on her desires for another women despite being married. The most poignant moment comes in her interactions with Qamar while she was pretending to be a man. Having finally being reunited with her husband, instead of revealing herself to him, she concocts a game of power where she is the hunter and he is the prey. She purposefully builds his anxiety over being potentially exploited sexually by another man. She strips him emotionally and mentally of self-confidence by coercing him into what he thought would be sodomy. All the while, Qamar breaks down and starts weeping, she calmly orders him to touch her thereby adding to his distress. Clearly,

Budur enjoyed the turn of events where she had the upper hand over him. Thus, this instance demonstrates both the power struggle that ensues between the genders to dominate.

On the other hand, Qamar is portrayed as with an unpredictable temperament. For instance, the first time when he looks for Budur after having awakened in his attic, he almost kills his father's vizier by torturing him to the point of death. Yet this temperament is absent for his self-defense when he is faced with a quandary with the king. Moreover, when he finds out about both his wives' unfaithfulness, he does not take any action against either woman despite the serious allegations. Like the men in the preceding tales, his careless wandering leads him away from the familiar and puts him into trouble. Thus, Qamar may not be far from been like Shahrayar.

Moreover, even love has a different shade in this tale for intense desire for the beloved leads both Budur and Qamar to inflict grievous injuries on other people. Next, they harm themselves by falling sick. Hence, love is consistently shown to come hand in hand with violence which destroys either oneself or the other. Next, after winning the labor of love, Budur chooses to pursue relations with her co-wife and then in the future, her step son. Thus, Budur is the manifestation of the male fear of voracious female sexuality which can cause chaos in the order of the world.

In conclusion, these select tales from the *Arabian Nights* resolves a few dilemmas surrounding women's portrayal. Though both men and women are cast in a harsh light at times, these tales establish the moral virtues in its main characters, Shahrayar and Shahrazad. For one, since women were portrayed as adulterous, the question that followed was if women could be faithful in relationships and if men would always be susceptible to being deceived by women's charms. Shahrazad

demonstrates that despite the weaknesses of her sex, women do have capacity to love deeply and remain faithful while also using their charms for a good cause as did Shahrazad by saving Shahrayar from his own depravities. Moreover, even if the wandering man brings only trouble on himself by straying, as long as he is able to return to his partner, he stays safe both morally and physically. Similarly, Shahrayar's straying causes him to embark on a murderous vendetta but having found his partner, he too returns to his moral roots.

Lastly, these relationships between men and women in the medieval times help us understand some phenomena's in contemporary fiction. For one, in these medieval tales, both men and women constantly contest for power to rule the other where as in contemporary fiction to follow, men usually and successfully rule over women. The discussion of sex and sexuality is frank from both men and women. For instance, the couples are all young whereas in contemporary literature, women who discuss issues of sexuality openly are either married or of low social strata such as prostitutes. The fears portrayed of female sexuality results in depictions of adulterous woman, thereby manifesting themselves in contemporary literature as fitna where men out of fear of women strictly control their mobility and sexuality. Thus, even though the power dynamics between the genders has changed in literature throughout the times, the desires and fears that motivate these struggles remain the same.

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Chapter 2

FEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC LITERATURE

Introduction

Modern Arabic literature is a testament and a window in the lives and struggles of the Arab peoples. One such struggle against the practice of female genital cutting is manifest in literature in recent times. Although widely condemned in the Western and Eastern world, female genital cutting (FGC)⁷ is considered largely a justifiable cultural practice in the countries and areas of North Africa and the Middle East. From an anthropological point of view, culture is seen to be richly embedded with meanings and practices (Gordon 4). With this view, one could state that the determination of right or wrong varies by culture (Tilley 501). This view constitutes the basic premise of cultural relativism (501). Biological anthropologist Melvin Kramer writes of cultural relativism having its limits and female genital cutting being one of those limits (Gordon 4). The limit drawn here is important to note because while all cultures have rich meanings and significant practices, any actions that harm[s] the wellbeing of NB another human being cannot be justified in the name of culture. The reason I defined cultural relativism here is to point out the dangers of passively accepting everything and justifying harm. A reader unfamiliar with the Middle East culture and customs would be more susceptible to falling in this trap of not being able to identify the harms

⁷ The terms female genital cutting, fgc, F.G.C, and genital cutting are used interchangeably by the author.

of genital cutting and may instead passively approve the ideas as cultural practices. However, dismissing everything in order to be accepting, we have to hear the voices that speak from within the cultures to understand if indeed the practices are completely justified in the name of culture or if there is a sense of resistance. Hence, it is important to know the differentiation between tolerating cultural practices and actively resisting harmful observances such as genital cutting.

Female genital cutting has been deemed barbaric and traumatizing by Arab feminists such as Alifa Rifaat and Nawal El Saadawi. Even male writers such as Tayeb Salih have written about female genital cutting to show the complexity of the issue deeply entrenched in Middle East and North African societies. FGC is also undoubtedly a human rights violation of women. By studying the occurrence in literature, the issue is stripped clear of the “cultural” lenses, hence, the reader is made aware of the dissenting voices that condemn this practice. Literature such as the works of Egyptian, feminist writers Nawal El Saadawi and Alifa Rifaat and the Sudanese author, Tayeb Salih who have respectively authored *God Dies by the Nile* , *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Works* and *Seasons Migration to the North* provide the very voices within those cultures where female genital cutting occurs. These voices have become “agents of transformation” not only in their societies but other places as well because they have stripped the curtains of “culture” to reveal that female genital cutting is essentially harmful.

Female genital cutting is a practice intricately backed up by traditions, customs, even religion. Hence the issue in itself is multi-dimensional and needs an approach that both explains the condemnation and justification of the practice. Authors here provide those dimensions from either their own experiences with genital

cutting or from being in a culture that to this day follows genital cutting. Alifa Rifaat condemns genital cutting by baring the psychological pain that girls and women suffer from FGC, a trauma that is also discussed by Saadawi in her work *Hidden Face of Eve*. On the other hand, Saadawi represents the viewpoint of the women who believe and endorse such praxis. It is important to note that despite being a medical doctor who has treated many FGC related complications and written extensively against the practice of FGC, Saadawi writes certainly not to propagate the practice but to reveal the cultural ideology surrounding the practice. On the other hand, Salih balances the issue with the viewpoints represented of both man and woman in this issue. Thus, literature provides us with the proper lenses through which we can view an issue to understand the different voices that from within the culture cry out against FGC. The literature selected here reflects the struggles of many more activists who are working to eradicate this practice and also the deep rooted beliefs of the people who do perpetuate this practice.

Defining the term

The usage of terms to describe the cutting done to the female genitalia varies due to authorial choices and personal beliefs. Some writers prefer terms such as female genital cutting or female circumcision to downplay the harmful effects. However, I use the term cutting instead of mutilation because mutilation implies “evil harm and intent” (Gruenbaum 3). The term used here is not in any way intended to downplay the negative effects of FGC but rather is used in an attempt to understand the practice from the practitioner’s point of view. While even the mildest form of genital cutting can be deemed mutilating, the term itself seems hostile and disrespectful which can further close down any dialogue that could bring an end to this

phenomena. Moreover, the term “mutilation” immediately condemns those who seek such procedures for their daughters without understanding the motivations that might be driving the action (Cook 7).

Regardless of using cutting or mutilation, both terms depicts accurately the violation of human rights of girls and women. The term “F.G.M.” (Female genital mutilation) has been widely accepted since the 1990’s. According to Ellen Gruenbaum, the author of *Female Circumcision Controversy*, the term “mutilation” is technically accurate because the practice involves removal of healthy organs often accompanied by unintentional damage (Gruenbaum 3). While there is often unintentional damage because of lack of knowledge on both the family and the day’s (local midwife) part, the term ‘mutilation’ fails to take into consideration the social and cultural forces that coerce families into taking such decisions for the better future of their daughters. Furthermore, Gruenbaum argues that the variant term, “female circumcision,” brings to mind the generally non mutilating practice of removing the foreskin on male genitalia. Since the term “circumcision” does not take into account the damage and danger of the practice, the term is widely rejected (4). The term circumcision also implies religious connotations with the practice when there are no requirements in Islam that seek to have its women cut up.

Undoubtedly, cultural forces play a big role in how FGC is termed and viewed. For instance, Gruenbaum mentions from her research conducted done in Sudan that the term used to describe FGC in Sudanese Arabic is ‘Tahur,’ which means purification. Thus, the word “tahur” misleadingly connotes genital cutting with cleanliness and normalcy. This idea of “tahur” is reflected in Egypt as well because Saadawi reports from her personal experiences as a medical doctor that the procedure

was referred to as the “cleansing operation” in the language of the common people (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 34). Saadawi also mentions in *The Hidden face of Eve* how her patients actually thought that FGC procedures led to cleanliness and promoted good health (34). This view clearly goes against the ‘implied harm and evil intent’ associated with the term mutilation. The false belief of the common people that FGC equals cleanliness and good health is reflected in Saadawi’s work *God dies by the Nile* in Fatheya’s character who mentions feeling happy and clean post FGC. Hence, it is vital to define the procedure in the common language because the implication of words impact how people view the practice. Such false perceptions only perpetuate these harmful practices and hence the procedures continue to be accepted.

Various forms of FGC

It is important to understand the context of fgc before we study its place in literature. FGC can roughly be classified under two categories, the Sunna circumcision, which entails the less severe form of genital cutting (Gruenbaum 63), and the pharaonic circumcision, which includes the more severe form. Sunna circumcision, also known as clitoridectomy, involves the excision of the clitoris or clitoral prepuce along with partial or complete removal of the labia minora (Edwards and Woolard). Infibulation, or pharaonic circumcision, includes clitoridectomy and excision of the labia minora along with inner walls of labia majora (Edwards and Woolard). The edges then are sewn together with a tiny opening left to pass menses and urine (Edwards and Woolard). Secondary infibulations are known as reinfibulation which is performed on women post child birth to re-stich the scar tissue from infibulation. Reinfibulation literally means “putting right and improving” and

also functions to mimic a tightened pathway or “narrow introitus of a virgin” (Berggren et al. 25).

The less radical form of pharaonic circumcision is known as *tahur-al-wasit* or *tahur mitwasat* (intermediate purification) in Sudan, which includes removing parts of the clitoris and inner labia with the outer labia stitched with a wide opening to facilitate the flow of urine and menses (Boddy). The “intermediate purification” method was introduced by Mabel Wolff, a British nurse-midwife of the colonial era who had taught in Egypt (64). Her intention in introducing the modified version of the operation in Sudan was to make it less radicalized and slowly introduce milder forms until the practice died down (64). Despite her making efforts to curb FGC, the persistence of FGC continued in Sudan.

Medical risks and complications

Perhaps the primary reason FGC can be considered an inhumane practice is because of the medical complications and dangers involved to the girls and women. It is also an attack on women’s sexuality. Although the practice is richly steeped in culture and perhaps in some peoples’ minds, embedded as part of their religion, the practice itself is worthy of condemnation because it violates the integrity of a woman’s body. By reducing a woman perfectly endowed with nature to mere parts by cutting up her sexual organs reduces her worth as a human being as well because her existence and worth are being solely defined by her body. Ironically, a body that is policed by society and well out of her control when it comes to making decisions such as undergoing FGC procedures. By mutilating a woman’s body in such a manner, society denies a woman what nature intended to fulfill with the anatomical and biological

characteristics thus upsetting the fulfillment of psychological and physical functions (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 27).

Ethics and cultural beliefs aside, all forms of genital mutilation carry the risk of infection due to unhygienic practices and circumstances (Gruenbaum 5). Often the circumcisers have minimal training, thus increasing the risk of infection due to lack of knowledge (5). Saadawi relays witnessing a genital mutilation where the *daya* (local midwife) cut in the vaginal wall of her patient to make more blood come out with no consideration for the young girl (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 29). Such dangerous and unhealthy practices induce inflammatory conditions (33). Additional problems include lack of sterilized equipment and hemorrhaging (uncontrolled bleeding) which can cause the body to go into shock and result in death (Gruenbaum 5).

Moreover, the risk of blood poisoning (septicemia) is also present (Gruenbaum 5). Other medical complications such as urinary tract infections, vaginal stones, stenosis (vaginal narrowing), urine retention, pain, obstruction of the urethral opening, and adhesions of the labial tissue can occur (5). An unfortunate occurrence of blocked menses can also occur leading to a distended uterus. The strong relation between a woman's body and the cultural practices surrounding women are manifested in Gruenbaum's reports about two cases in Sudan where the obstructed menses of a young girl led people to suspect she was pregnant. In one case the girl was killed for the sake of honor (5). In the other case, pregnancy was suspected in the case of a 15 year old girl but the cause of blocked menses was luckily detected (5). These unfortunate events were not limited to Sudan because Saadawi recounted the death of a young girl who post mortem report revealed her supposed pregnancy was due to blocked menses as well due to a "thick, unperforated hymen" (*The Hidden Face of*

Eve 26). Other than danger of death due to blocked menses, women face complications during intercourse and delivery because the infibulation requires cutting open the tissue (Gruenbaum 5). If the infibulation is not opened up during intercourse, women may suffer from chronic pelvic inflammation, which can lead to infertility and painful intercourse (5).

Physical trauma aside, there can be long lasting psychological trauma as well from the painful experiences that young girls often go through being mentally unprepared. Writers such as El Saadawi portray the mental distress that women could endure from such experiences (Gruenbaum 7). Abdalla mentions permanent frigidity, psychoses, and a negative effect on the young girl's personality (7). El Saadawi herself reports being haunted by the memory of her circumcision even as a grown woman and feeling insecure (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 8). She mentions sexual frigidity as a result in most Arab women who underwent FGC and psychological shock on the personality development of young girls and adolescent women (33). Egyptian, feminist author, Rifaat continues in this vein in her writing where she lays bare the mental anguish of a woman scarred from her genital mutilation. The pain portrayed in Rifaat's fiction echoes El Saadawi's own experiences from her work *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Given the high physical and emotional costs of this practice for women, we need to understand how and when such practices emerged and were allowed to continue.

Islam and FGC

Although widely practiced in Islamic countries, the practice of FGC predates Islam and can be traced back to the fifth century B.C. where it was practiced from Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America to Europe and North America (Edwards &

Woolard). The origins of the practice itself are unknown (Gruenbaum 43) but it has been chronicled that FGC was practiced in the pharaonic kingdoms of Egypt and records demonstrate the existence of FGC 700 years before Christ was born (*The Hidden face of Eve* 40). The presence of FGC being practiced in Egypt has being said to have occurred well before the Arab invasions (Berkey 21). This clearly demonstrates that FGC was not an Islamic practice but a phenomena occurring in societies of varying religious and cultural backgrounds (*The Hidden face of Eve* 40). Moreover, the Quran does not make any reference to the practice of FGC (Berkey 20). FGC in any form is not a universal practice of the Islam world, rather it was practiced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike such as the Coptic Christians in Egypt (20). One reason why Islam has come to become linked with FGC is because historically, female excision was testified to only parts of the Islamic world (20)

Despite retaining non Islamic practice, Islam did not condone the practice of FGC. The religious position on the issue is unclear as religious scholars have had debates on the issue in Egypt and went as far as to issue fatwas that approved the practice (Gruenbaum 63). On the other hand, there have also been arguments by religious scholars and theologians who contested if the practice was indeed Islamic and if FGC should be practiced by Muslims as the Quran makes no reference to FGC (63-64). Additionally, El Saadawi enlightens by pointing out the false logic of those who support FGC in the name of religion. She comments if God created a healthy organ, then surely God would not have wanted to have the organ cut off unless the organ was diseased or deformed (*The Hidden face of Eve* 42). She also references the hadiths (compilation of the Prophet's sayings), where the Prophet is said to have advised a woman named Om Attiah who performed FGC procedures to refrain from

cutting too deep or cutting away most of the clitoris as both the husband and wife would have a sexually fulfilling relationship (39). The Prophet did not encourage FGC but rather said this in an attempt to dissuade the practice. However, since this practice is surrounded by religious disputes, there is no single, agreed upon view (Gruenbaum 65).

FGC in cultural contexts

Western readers often mistake cultural practices in the Islamic world as an attribute of Islam. However, one must be careful when making such generalizations because Islam is not only a religion but a way of life. When Mohammed set out to introduce one of the major religions of the world, he was careful to not disturb the complete order of the world around him. This, he did partially by absorbing culture in religion. Since the Islamic world spans across the whole world ranging from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia to Far East countries such as Indonesia, identifying cultural practices with Islam would be erroneous.

To put genital mutilation in cultural contexts, one must understand the importance of tradition in cultures where there is a high interdependence between people, customs, and religious beliefs. One way to differentiate between cultural and religious practices is to pay close attention to traditions and beliefs surrounding practices. For instance, Muslims place strong values on parental opinions; hence, the practice or rather the tradition of FGC gets passed down along with knowledge about religion. As a result, the practice itself might remain unquestioned to people who engage in such exercises (Gruenbaum 62). Another way to understand this practice is to look at deeply held beliefs surrounding this phenomena. Blaming patriarchy as the sole cause of FGC would be over simplifying matters as it is the women themselves

who often carry out these operations and condone beliefs about beauty and cleanliness surrounding the mutilation. There is an overarching belief that FGC will curb a woman's sexuality thus helping her keep a virgin until marriage (Berggren et al 29). The lack of procedure implies a girl whose behavior will be "bad" and who will 'start chasing men' resulting in no one wanting to marry her (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 35). Such a girl/woman will be considered not worthy of honor and a woman without honor is worse than "damaged goods" in these societies, meaning she will have no desirable prospects in life. Thus, families might practice FGC as a way to safeguard their women's chastity.

Incidentally, there are some theories that serve to explain the continued practice of an ancient atrocity such as FGC. A common theory surrounding FGC is the ancient belief in the bisexuality of gods. Women were believed to be carrying "male parts" in their labia or clitoris. Excision was used as a means to make a woman "fully female" (Berkey 30). Another reason for the continued practice of FGC was proposed by a study which stated that the custom served as a rite to ensure fertility (29). Especially in places such as northern Sudanese villages where FGC was a prerequisite for marriage, a young woman would have a chance at marrying and producing sons which would be her surest path to "social status and respect" (29). Conversely, there is also a social pressure to conform to the practice of FGC because the girls who do not undergo these procedures risk being stigmatized (Berggren et al 29). These girls might be insulted with the expression 'ghalpa' which has connotations of girls smelling nasty (29), thereby advancing the belief that FGC leads to cleanliness and desirability. The publicity of the state a woman's genitals are in is made known by inviting a number of older women are present thus acting as the eye witnesses to the fact that proper

precautions were taken to protect the girl's chastity. This is also done to "celebrate" as FGC when regarded as 'circumcision' is considered a joyful event which would entail the presence of family and friends.

With multiple factors that either advocate the practice or coerce families into making their daughters undergo these procedures, it is easy to see why this practice is still in existence. Families have a strong responsibility to protect their daughters who are considered the honor of their households while also ensuring that their daughters remain marriageable. This purpose is achieved through genital mutilation, which the families would term as circumcision. I use the term circumcision to assent to the families' intentions behind the practices, although I do not condone the practice.

Furthermore, FGC helps in 'preserving' the family honor by prohibiting girls from either seeking sexual activity or from being raped. Infibulation or pharaonic circumcision which can be rightly termed as genital mutilation depends on the "infibulated vulva" as a natural barrier of flesh which makes penetration impossible and hence deters a young woman from seeking sexual activity before her marriage (Gruenbaum78). However, genital cutting cannot serve as a morality check because infibulations can always be undone and redone granted the woman can find a discreet nurse and endure the pain. Thus, the idea that infibulation protects a woman's virginity is challenged. Hence, the practice of infibulation or genital mutilation cannot be viewed in simplistic notions of patriarchal attempts at controlling women's sexuality. The beliefs that drive genital cutting practices are deep rooted notions about honor, virginity, beauty, and marriageability of a woman.

Consequently, the importance placed on virginity and proper sexual behavior derives from the religious commands as well as traditional and social obligations (77).

Although in theory, sexual propriety is intended for both men and women, it is women who are placed with the burden of preserving their “honor”. I previously mentioned the Arabic term “tahir” meaning purification, which was meant to explain how Sudanese viewed this practice. The idea about purification emanates from the aesthetic beliefs women have about their own anatomy. For instance, in a study that Gruenbaum reported about, women emphasized the “cleanliness” and the smoothness of the vulva (resulted from scar tissue of infibulation), and termed the body as pure thus echoing the ideas that the word “tahir” evokes (79). This idea about purity and even good health was resonated by Saadawi’s patients in Egypt. Hence, these false ideas surrounding FGC resonate the larger conflicts of FGC in the Middle East and North African countries.

Another cultural idea that drives genital mutilation is the need to fix gender identity. Egyptians cited clitoridectomy as an effort to remove “male like organs “like the clitoris, which like the penis experiences concentrated flow of blood and hardens when a woman is aroused. In Sudan, the removal of the clitoris and the resulting smooth scar tissue is considered feminine (67). In northern Sudan, the labia and the clitoris are considered male parts and thus deemed ugly on a girl (68). Thus, making girls undergo these “corrective” form of surgeries is meant to balance gender ambiguity issues along with ensuring a heightened aesthetic appeal and a guarantor of virginity (68).

FGC in literature

As mentioned earlier, El Saadawi , Alifa Rifaat, and Salih contest the issue of female genital cutting in their works respectively titled *God Dies by the Nile*, *Distant View of a Minaret and other stories*, and *Seasons Migration to the North*. The

approach the authors take, however, differs. Although the topic of genital cutting is not the sole focus of either work, the issue is mentioned in an effort to raise awareness and create an understanding between the reader and the women who undergo such painful procedures. It is important to read literature within a multidimensional approach of anthropological, history, religion among other applicable disciplines to take into account the driving forces and the reasons that allow the practices to continue. More than anything, literature infuses human experiences that are largely absent from fields of observation such as medicine and anthropology. To be able to engage in the human experience, the reader should be able to step in the very shoes in which he/she intends to undertake the journey in. Hence, armed with the very voices of the North African peoples, the reader can now understand the psychological state of women who were made to undergo genital cutting and perhaps why those same woman might a generation later continue these practices that might have possibly haunted them.

In *God Dies by the Nile*, Fatheya, the unhappy wife of the village imam recounts her experience of being cut in the following way, “She did not know exactly what it was that was wrong with her, but ever since her childhood she had felt there was something impure about her, that something in her body was unclean and bad. Then one day Om Saber came to their house, and she was told that the old woman was going to cut the bad, unclean part off. She was overcome by a feeling of overwhelming happiness. She was only six years old at the time. After having done what she was supposed to do, Om Saber went away leaving a small wound between her thighs. It continued to bleed for several days.” (El Saadawi 32).

Through a cursory reading of the passage above, the reader might mistakenly assume that El Saadawi propagates the practice of female genital mutilation. However, this is not the case as not only does El Saadawi openly speak out against the practice from a feminist and humanitarian stand point but also through relating her own traumatic experiences of genital mutilation as a child (Roberts). El Saadawi shows us the mindset of the Egyptian woman who has internalized the message that she is “unclean” prior to the genital cutting procedures. Moreover, El Saadawi, through the eyes of Fatheya, shows the readers (Western and Eastern) why Fatheya approved of the procedure. In Fatheya’s eyes, the mutilation has caused bad parts of be taken out of her, thus rendering her pure and clean. This thinking fits in the cultural view of aesthetics and “tahir”. Notably, El Saadawi also passingly mentions Fatheya’s age. El Saadawi draws attention to the fact that even a child of six years old has learned to internalize the false concepts of “tahir” and then is subjected to genital cutting procedures in the worst way possible by leaving her to the mercy of the *daya* who very likely lacks both the medical training and the equipment to safely and hygienically carry out these procedures. The silence surrounding the operation in the passage and the lack of female figures present show the implicit approval of women. The lack of resistance on older women’s part is reminiscent of El Saadawi’s own experience with genital cutting where she found her own mother to be a participant in the unfortunate ceremony (*Hidden Face of Eve* 8). Even though El Saadawi’s own experiences of genital cutting were filled with terror and anxiety at being taken hostage by strange hands in the middle of the night, she does not project these fears on Fatheya. If anything, Fatheya experiences the calmness and confidence that was elusive to El Saadawi.

However, El Saadawi is far from condoning this practice in the above passage. As a writer, she is forceful and at times expects her readers to unearth the meaning in her writing. As a doctor, she has also witnessed firsthand the medical complications that have resulted from such operations. Thus, knowing her background it is safe to assume she does not support FGC. Her strategy is to present the typical attitudes of girls who undergo the procedure so readers can see the other side of the coin. Knowing that Fatheya was falsely led to believe she was “dirty and unclean” helps readers know that for those people who practice genital mutilation, the phenomena is natural and cultural. Thus, El Saadawi also establishes how difficult it is to bring changes to such places where beliefs about cleanliness and beauty are firmly entrenched in the peoples’ minds from a young age.

Rifaat’s *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Works* is a collection of vignettes in which she breaks the conventions of silence thereby laying bare the secret desires and happenings of Egyptian women’s lives which are unabashedly discussed through the rich narration of female characters about lives which are marked with unfulfilled sexual desires, forceful genital cutting, unhappiness, and silence. The main themes are sex and death (Rifaat viii) and undoubtedly the issue of genital cutting can fit within the subjects of both sex and death. These themes are explored in the vignette titled “Bahiyya’s Eyes” wherein Bahiyya, an old woman tells her story about her unhappy youth. She talks about her lack of sex education and her subsequent genital cutting which further adds unhappiness in her marriage. Moreover, she recounts the violent episode of her genital cutting where a number of women grab her forcefully and “cut away at the mulberry with razor” (9). This incident takes places when she

demonstrates her awareness of sexuality by making made clay dolls of a man and woman with different anatomies.

Through Bahiyya's story, Rifaat portrays the psychological scarring of genital mutilation. Bahiyya recounts her pain in the following passage, "Then early one day as I was about to go out to have a look at my mud things and see whether or not they'd dried yet in the sun, I found the women coming in and gathering round, and then they took hold of me and forced my legs open and cut away the mulberry with a razor. They left me with a wound in my body and another wound deep inside me, a feeling that a wrong had been done to me, a wrong that could never be undone. And so the tears welled up in my eyes once again "(Rifaat 9).

Rifaat aptly captures the lingering sadness that Bahiyya feels when she is forced to undergo genital mutilation. Furthermore, Bahiyya is made to undergo this procedure right around the time when she is becoming aware about sexuality thereby symbolically and physically cutting her off from knowledge that could be 'dangerous' for her. The women who mutilate her do not want her to be aware about her own sexual identity and body yet they expect Bahiyya to behave in a manner deemed sexually appropriate for a woman. Bahiyya is forced to give up part of her physical identity as a woman as soon as she learns to differentiate between the sexes. To the women, who are metaphors for the dayas and the ruling matriarchs of society, Bahiyya is no more a little girl but a "fitna" and to maintain order, her "surplus" sexuality must be removed ("Contesting the culture" 32-34). Rifaat purposefully does not seek to humanize these women who carry out these procedures against other women. Instead, by attributing traits of cruelty and coldness, she denounces both the practice itself and the people who perpetuate these beliefs. By juxtaposing themes of death and sex along

with feelings of unfulfillment and yearning on the women's part within the main framework of the book, Rifaat stresses on the death of women's desires that arises from the negative memories and feelings associated with genital cutting.

Moreover, the trauma of Bahiyya's mutilation stays with her even as an old woman. She narrates her sadness and the lack of control she had over her own body. Rifaat, through Bahiyya, positions herself in the shoes of a woman who had been forced to undergo FGC. Bahiyya's experiences of genital cutting mirror Rifaat's own experiences of physical and emotional trauma that accompanies these procedures (Nkealah). Bahiyya aptly puts her pain when she relays, "They left me with a wound in my body and another wound deep inside me, a feeling that a wrong had been done to me, a wrong that could never be undone. And so the tears welled up in my eyes again" (Rifaat 9). Rifaat focuses clearly on the other side of the issue to show firsthand the physical trauma and psychological scars that stay with the victim. Unlike El Saadawi, who expects readers to dig deeper, Rifaat clearly highlights her stance on the issue and puts a human perspective on the practice through her writing by laying bare the psychological states of the victims of these procedures. Her purpose is to show the whole truth by portraying the anguish that Bahiyya goes through thereby decrying the practice of genital mutilation.

Both Rifaat and El Saadawi work to advocate fulfillment for women however, Rifaat works within the Islamic framework of marriage and religion primarily whereas El Saadawi employs a more radical stance in her writing (Botman 560). The differences in their approaches could be attributed to their different backgrounds since El Saadawi had access to stories of her patients which combined with her medical training and her gift of resistance writing helped her form a view that took into

account the perpetuating factors of such customs. On the other hand, Rifaat's whole life has been spent in "various parts of provincial Egypt" with the exception of religious pilgrimages to Mecca (Rifaat vii). She also lacks the benefits of university education that El Saadawi profited from and has not known any other language other than Arabic thereby limiting her exposure to the outer world of Egypt. However, it is because of these confined frameworks that Rifaat is able to offer the unadulterated view of an Egyptian women's perspective in a "forcefully written book" (Hetata 559).

Consequently, Tayeb Salih puts an interesting spin on the issue by portraying the issue through a gendered lens. For instance, in a conversation Bint Majzoub has with her friends about sex, she mentions how the English woman or "infidels" as she calls them "aren't so knowledgeable about this business as [the] village girls [in Sudan]. They are uncircumcised and treat the whole business [sex] like having a drink of water" (Salih 80). It is clear that Bint Majzoub associates a woman's sexuality with genital cutting. However, her associations are the complete opposite of what El Saadawi and Rifaat have portrayed.

Rather than linking genital cutting with sexual frigidity as El Saadawi does in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Bint Majzoub lists genital cutting or "circumcision" as a prerequisite for "proper" and fulfilling sex. Despite being a woman, Majzoub advocates the practice by condoning it on the basis of primarily sexual satisfaction of a woman. Ironically, the predominant reason that genital cutting is practiced is with the belief to take out the "surplus" from a woman and to keep her sexuality in control. Moreover, "circumcising" or clitoridectomy is performed with the intention of cutting off the organ to prevent the woman from experiencing any pleasure in order to keep

her away from temptations to seek out sex. It is unclear why Majzoub agrees to ‘circumcision’ even though she lives for carnal pleasure.

Additionally, it is her friend Wad Rayyes who decries the practice because he feels “circumcision” detracts from sexual pleasure. He states in a comparison of women from Abyssinia and Nigeria “that the thing [clitoris] between their thighs is like an upturned dish, all there for good and bad” (81). He goes on to denounce the practice by saying, “we here lop it [clitoris] off and leave it like a piece of land that has been stripped bare” (81). Wad Rayyes clearly recognizes that women are perfectly endowed by nature with certain organs for their own reasons and he accurately compares stripping a natural land in its fullness and reducing it barren to what women are made to go through in the name of circumcision.

Though his language is vulgar, he is able to identify that genital cutting does strip off an essential part of a woman. Even the usage of the word barren has multiple meanings here as medical complications occur regularly in women who undergo genital cutting indeed lead to infertility in women. Furthermore, Wad Rayyes too like Bint Majzoub lives for sexual enjoyment primarily. Unlike her, he recognizes that genital cutting does strip bare a woman on multiple levels including physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual. El Saadawi talks about her own constant fear of being unsafe, which was a loss of security on a psychological level. Rifaat in the vignette *Bahiyya’s Eyes* tells through Bahiyya how physically being stripped off her [Bahiyya] body part led her to be stripped of emotional happiness as well as sexual fulfillment.

Lastly, Wad Rayyes’ positioning on the discourse of female genital cutting underscores the relationship of patriarchy with the practice. It is clear from his point of

view that patriarchy does not advocate this practice. Though genital cutting is carried out with the intention to protect the woman and the desire to please the man, it is a man himself in this case who denounces the practice. This phenomena is not at all fictional neither unrealistic as men do emphasize with their women who undergo these procedures (Berggren, et al 32). Their wives sexual frigidity and physical discomfort lead to sexual dissatisfaction and psychological frustration for men as well (32). Thus, Wad Rayyes accurately compares a “land that has been stripped bare” with genital cutting as the bareness affects both men and women. Wad Rayyes’ disapproval of genital cutting also reveals the perpetuating factor in this practice, i.e., women themselves. Bint Majzoub’s support of the practice in lieu of sexual satisfaction shows the power older women wield over younger women (33).

This does not mean that women intentionally create systems to harm other women. The origins of genital cutting are unknown as of now and the reason women perpetuate this practice is to ensure other women’s happiness since genital cutting carries with it strong notions of beauty and sexuality. In this context, the term maternalism explains the behavior of women who support these practices with the good intention to protect other women (33). Though the meanings of the term maternalism have differed on usage, in the context of genital cutting, maternalism is understood as some form of interference with another person’s preference regarding their own good with the aim of benefiting her” (33). Bint Majzoub’s advocating the practice is maternalism in some way because her priority is sexual satisfaction and it is with that goal that she supports the practice to ensure that both the women and their husbands stay happy and sexually satisfied.

In conclusion, the fiction under consideration gives us new ways to understand the cultural and emotional contexts within which to view the practice of genital cutting. Accommodating the other culture's view helps us get away from ethnocentrism. However, blindly accepting practices in the name of culture without determining the morality of the actions can lead us to practice cultural relativism. Thus, the line between accommodating cultural practices and decrying wrong can become blurred.

The driving forces that perpetuate FGC do have understandable intentions behind them, such as wanting to see a daughter married off happily and respectably. The means though cannot justify the end, especially when the results can be as harmful as psychological and emotional scarring along with harmful physical effects. Rifaat, El Saadawi, and Salih both denounce the harmful practice thereby divorcing from their cultures that which is not good. Since the authors have experienced genital cutting in one way or the other, either by being the victim or by being part of a society that inflicted this harm, their writing provides a testimony to the harmful effects present in genital cutting. Lastly, by relying on narratives coming from regions such as these, we un-write the Orientalism that Said had talked about where the voices of the "other" were silenced. Rifaat, El Saadawi, and Salih have taken the "culture" out of a practice and established the issue of FGC in the context of human rights thereby clearly taking out any relativism that threatens the determination of morality.

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Chapter 3

VARIANT MASCULINITIES IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Introduction to masculinities

This chapter attempts to frame different aspects of masculinities in two works, namely “*Palace Walk*” by Naquib Mahfouz and “*The Swallows of Kabul*” by Yasmina Khadara. The masculinities under study fall into categories of hegemonic, complicit, and marginalized masculinity. These masculinities are studied with the belief that “masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals [but] are [rather] configurations of practice that are achieved in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt 836). Thus, even though the study focuses on individual men in the novels, the goal of this study is to differentiate what it means to be a “man” in a particular society. In other words, I depart from biological constructions of manhood in order to examine how individual men “enjoy the benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group” and how they present themselves to others as a “particular kind of social being: a man” (Schrock & Schwalbe 3). The works in this chapter also achieve two goals; first, they form a comparative study of gender identity and roles with *The Arabian Nights* (see chapter 1). Secondly, they also frame the discussion of masculinity within the context of honor killing (see chapter 4). Thus, while the study as a whole focuses on gender and sexuality, these individual literary texts also aim to portray the different issues regarding masculinities, gender roles, and gender identities. I will stress the plurality

of masculinity to emphasize that there are multiple forms of masculinities which are distinct from the well-known hegemonic masculinity (4). The recognition of distinct masculinities is important because it helps us identify differences and inequalities men face among groups of men as well as in relation to women (4). The distinctions also reflect the diversity of issues relevant to men from different socio-economic and political strata since “particular masculinities are themselves subordinated by the hegemonic practice” thereby rendering the other forms of masculinity as “subordinate” or marginalized (Demetriou 340-341).

The texts selected discuss two aspects of gender construction regarding masculinities in two different settings. While the settings are disparate, the two texts together bring to light the complex involvement of society in the construction of what we consider traditional masculine roles. The lack of a traditional societal structure that male characters experience in the depiction of life under the Taliban in *The Swallows of Kabul* helps set up a stark contrast with the rigid patriarchal structure of peacetime Egypt in *Palace Walk*, where expressions of masculinity are strictly domineering. Thus, we can use this comparative study to analyze the disintegration of gender identity when it contends with powerful forces of society and class. The texts offer different but equally valuable readings on the construction and deconstruction of masculinities.

Deconstructing the spheres of masculinities in *Palace Walk*

Patriarchy is framed as tyrannical yet respectable in Mahfouz’s novel, *Palace Walk*, where he lovingly draws out characters with such fine detail that they start to feel like part of one’s own family. *Palace Walk* is part of the Cairo trilogy, which was

originally published in installments in a literary magazine and then produced in three separate novels which are *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street* (Milson). Much of the scholarship has focused on the Nobel Prize winner, Mahfouz himself. Critical scholarly attention has also been mostly concentrated on his two subsequent works in the trilogy (Milson). The sparse scholarship that exists on *Palace Walk* focuses on masculinity within the constructions of the Egyptian nationalist narrative (Gad), is directed at themes that are irrelevant to the purposes of this essay (Elsadda , El-Enany), or consists of reviews (Castronova).

The focus of this essay is on the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the public and domestic sphere. *Palace Walk* traces the lives of a Cairene family against the backdrop of Egypt's political upheaval in the years of 1917-1919 where Egyptians sought to overthrow their British rulers (Milson). The narrative focuses on the buildup of characters and their relationships with each other with the gentle murmurings of the Egyptian revolution gaining momentum in the background. The Cairene family follow the dictates of the father, Al Sayyid Ahmad, more closely than the rules of Islam. Al Sayyid Ahmad is the epitome of hypocrisy who rules over his family with an extremely strict code of behavior permitting them neither opportunities nor the confidence to question his opinions and decisions (Milson). At home, he is the model of excellence in practicing the virtues of his religion when he observes his prayers in a timely fashion. However, unbeknownst to his children, at night, he metamorphoses into a man who smiles, jokes, makes music, and drinks wine in the company of friends and prostitutes. His family are more familiar with his taunts, anger, and biting sarcasm. He indulges in the very things such as merrymaking that he denies to his wife and children. Such is his discipline that he banishes his wife, Amina, from his home

when she visits the tomb of the saint Al- Husayn in his absence, appalled by her audacity at moving in a public place unaccompanied by him. His authority combined with the respect and fear he commands make him a formidable figure. His hegemonic masculinity is constructed by his patriarchal role, wherein he dominates the women as well as the men in his household.

Moreover, Al Sayyid Ahmad represents the ultimate patriarchal force in the novel. His masculinity is constructed by his two competing sides, which he keeps separated in the private and public spheres. For a male to be credited as a man at both home and society, he must put on a “convincing manhood act” which “requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity of “man” is established and upheld in interaction” (Schrock & Schwalbe 3). Here, we will examine two aspects of masculinities which derive from the conventional practices required of manhood, i.e. dominance over men and women as well as sexual relations with women. The first aspect of hegemonic masculinity is the power over “gender regimes” which includes the family or the domestic sphere (Demetriou 341). The image of the controlling husband and father is reminiscent of the stereotypical domineering male figure in feminist literature. Al Sayyid Ahmad derives his masculinity at home by subjugating his family to his wishes and anger. I use the word “family” to emphasize that hegemonic masculinity entails control over complicit masculinities as well, such as his son, Yasin’s. (342).

However, hegemonic masculinity entails positive actions as well including “bringing home a wage...and being a father” (Connell & Messerschmidt 840). As a responsible husband and father, Al Sayyid Ahmad provides abundantly for his home; his family never lacks the basics because “he had directed a merchant he knew to buy

up a reserve of clarified butter, wheat, and cheese for the house” (Mahfouz 11). He loves his children too; he inquires about them from his wife, although he hides his concern for them. He is also careful to shield his women from the wayward gaze of prying eyes and his concerns for the domestic sphere revolves around his home and business.

Additionally, to become a respect worthy father for his children, he hides his duplicitous acts from them by returning from his visits to brothels until late at night: “although he was in the habit of drinking to the point of intoxication every night, he postponed his return home until the effects of the wine had worn off and he had regained control of himself. He wished to protect his dignity and image at home. His wife was the only member of his family allowed to see him after he had been out carousing. The only effect of the drinking she could remark was the smell” (Mahfouz 9). This way, his dignity and authority remain above reproach by his family.

Al Sayyid Ahmad keeps his tenderness at bay, and if such moments do surface, they are “accidental and fleeting” (10). The only benefit his wife derives from the double standard life is that after partying he becomes “companionable and talkative” telling her his “innermost thoughts, thus making her feel, if only for the moment, that she was not just his servant but also a partner in his life” (11). His stoic person serves to form a formidable image beyond which emotions and feelings are inaccessible to his family members, including his wife. His emotional withdrawal is a form of “control strategy” that reinforces not only his stoicism but also his dominance, for he is virtually above his family members in all respects (Schrock & Schwalbe 9). Like a tyrannical ruler, he terrorizes his family with his anger and only doles out precious moments of company to his wife when he is in good spirits from drinking and

partying. The only time when the family gathers together is at breakfast, which in itself becomes a taxing event where he forces his family members to observe “military discipline” (19). Thus, in the private sphere, masculinity is derived from the level of control a patriarch can derive over the members of his family thus rendering the masculinity hegemonic because it guarantees the patriarch unquestionable authority and subordination of both men and women. The level of control a man exhibits in his domestic sphere reflects his standing in the social sphere as well: hegemonic masculinity “ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” and “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt 832).

Moreover, masculinity in the public sphere got weighed by a man’s public standing in the eyes of his friends and society. The public sense of masculinity demands a man who is both able to keep the chastity of his home secure while he himself seeks to quench the “unquenchable pleasures of life” (Mahfouz 10). Success in one public sphere is also measured by the responses the individual man has from his friends. For instance, Al Sayyid Ahmad often reflects on his interactions, “recall[ing] his clever remarks with a care and attention accented by wonder and self-satisfaction...He often feels the role he plays at these parties is so significant that it is practically the ultimate anyone could hope for in life” (10).

Undoubtedly, Al Sayyid Ahmad derives his sense of worth from his level of social acceptance. His calling in life is limited to being a people pleaser in the social sphere. Since he is not obliged to police others’ behavior, he is free to reveal his true self and enjoy the company of people not only with similar tastes but similar powers as well which can be considered a manifestation of the ideological hegemonic

masculinity where he has succeeded in subjecting women and the men under him all the while striving to become the “honored way of being a man” (Connell & Messerschmidt 832). The honored way in this context calls for the social aspect of masculinity to be free from engagements of the domestic sphere, hence, in the social sphere men reveal their personalities and are free from the burden of exercising their hegemony. In one way, the public sphere is also a hegemony constructed by the pleasure seeking group of males such as Al Sayid Ahmad to keep out men with complicit masculinities such as Yasin out. The public sphere is also where patriarchy exercises its double standards, for what is forbidden to the intimate members of one’s family is exclusively permissible to patriarchs such as Al Sayyid Ahmad.

As seen above, patriarchy becomes hegemonic in the domestic sphere when men feel the need to subjugate their dependents both for the sake of ‘purity’ of their homes so the emotions of the world would not defile their private spheres as well as for their own social standing for no man would be respected if he could not control the members of his own household. The construction of masculinity in the private sphere demands total obedience and subjugation on the participants’ parts. Conversely, masculinity in the social sphere is constructed by two elements, one of which is how well a man can keep his family above reproach while indulging in duplicitous behavior himself and the other is pleasing people in the society, which requires participation in behaviors that might go against the standards of one’s own ethics, morals, or even religion. Thus, masculinity is not representative of “a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connell & Messerschmidt 841).

Though discussion on the constructions of masculinity has largely been on men, women also play crucial roles in how men view and feel about themselves. For instance, women in the private sphere are sources of both joy and affliction for men as they are under the men's control and affect their images in the public sphere. Any violations of moral or social conduct is reflective on how men get viewed in the public sphere. This is why Al Sayyid Ahmad, who takes precise measures to maintain different but perfect images of piety and debauchery, respectively, at home and with friends, does not spare his obedient and timid wife Amina when she dares to venture out of her house and into the streets to visit the shrine of the saint Al-Husayn. Despite her piety and years of servitude, her husband punishes her by banishing her for an uncertain amount of time from his house. His attitude towards her reflects the feelings of boredom and security that results from having the same woman under his roof combined with a need to "discipline" her lest she risks his honor again. His actions are also a manifestation of an overt form of economic dominance to maintain relationship control (Schrock & Schwalbe 9). His controlling nature both overt and covert result from hegemonic practices which require the perpetual subordination of women because the "global dominance of men over women" define hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 344).

Consequently, the contestation for control is present in the sexual lives of men as well, for men in *Palace Walk* seem to experience an obsession with women "outside" of their family and seek to expend their energies trying to make those women their own. The "sexualization of women" serves not only to signify heterosexuality but also to "demarcate gender boundaries" which serves to distinguish the priorities and privileges of hegemonic masculinities (Schrock & Schwalbe 9). The

chase is made more enticing by the fact that these men can never “have” or subjugate these women as they have the women in their family because the women they desire are merely objects of desire. Since the women outside of the family are courtesans/prostitutes, they have more power (sexually) over men who seek them primarily for sexual relations. Hence, even though gender boundaries usually expect women to be submissive in all aspects of their being, women who are prostitutes and courtesans are exempt from abiding by the laws of gender boundaries and are equals to men in their pursuit of carnal relations. However, men benefit, ironically, from relations with “fallen” women who represent everything their wives cannot and relations with these women also becomes a means of social acceptance. In *Palace Walk*, Al Sayyid Ahmad is respected in his circle of friends for being able to afford and court lovers: “just as he loved beauty in the abstract, he loved it in its glittering social framework. He liked to be noticed and to have a widespread reputation. Therefore he enjoyed sharing his love and lovers with his special friends, except on those rare occasions when circumstances required him to be discreet and secretive” (Mahfuz 390).

The element of chase is present only with “fallen” woman of society as they are virtually inaccessible by decrees of religious authority and hypocritical moral and societal codes that aim to control men and women. The son of Al Sayyid Ahmad, Yasin, almost goes crazy from lust while courting the performer Zubayda because she is inaccessible to him owing to her place in society as a performer. His dilemma also stems because of his father’s double standards and iron control under which Yasin’s complicit masculinity bends down. Hence, Yasin can never fully control her or possess Zubayda with a sense of security. The attraction lies in the fact that his lovers,

like him, can seek out others and have the same amount of freedom and power as he does. Hence, the desire to possess the other person and to have control over them is present in contemporary literature too, just as it was present in *The Arabian Nights* where men and women vied over sexual power. “Heterosexual appetite” and sexual objectification of women are acts of manhood because sexual dominance and power is equivalent to social prestige and assertion of a manhood (Schrock & Schwalbe 12). The exploitative attitude of men towards women is also an “accepted definition of manhood,” since “self-identity”, “manhood”, and “prestige” are enhanced for men via sexual experiences with women (Hilal 89). For instance, Yasin impatiently and obsessively waits under Zubayda’s window thinking “go ahead, play the coquette, you bitch. Didn’t we agree on a date? But you are right to hold back...” (Mahfuz 242).

In Yasin’s case, attainment of Zubayda is not a matter of social prestige as it would be for his father but a means of asserting his manhood and self-identity. The conquest of Zubayda matters because it differs from conquering his wife, who is a readily available source of sexual pleasure: “when the hopeless and total disappointment of marriage overwhelmed him, his nerves were agitated by enduring the boredom or “the emptiness of life” (Mahfuz 333). Lastly, since Zubayda is able to select lovers like Yasin, she functions sexually at least in almost the same realm of freedom as men have. Hence, trying to dominate Zubayda would be equivalent to competing with his equal, which provides a source of personal “prestige” if the conquest is successful. Although Yasin’s actions are similar to that of men with hegemonic masculinities, his masculinity is “complicit” because his actions “passively” sustain the hegemonic model by the pursuit of common desires while still being under the domination of the hegemonic model (Demetriou 342).

Here, we witness the construction of two kinds of masculinities, the hegemonic and complicit, in their respective spheres. Along with the buildup of hegemonic masculinity, Mahfouz also shows us the way to break down, mainly in the form of Al Sayyid Ahmad, when he loses his beloved son, Fahmy, to the Egyptian revolution. The way for possible complicit or marginalized masculinity is paved when hegemonic masculinity loses its rigid control as happens with Al Sayyid Ahmad who struggles to come to terms with his son's death. His unemotional self and separation of private and public sphere crumbles apart when he receives the unfortunate news at his shop: "Dead! I will never see him again at home or anywhere else on the face of the earth? How can I have home without him? How can I be a father if he's gone? What has become of all the hopes attached to him?..Oh....Do you feel the searing pain? This really is pain" (Mahfouz 495-96).

The power he previously exercised over his family is unable to keep death from taking away his son. His concerns towards his wife previously aimed at subjugating her and alienating her change into concern when "he remembered Amina for the first time and his feet almost failed him. What could he say to her?...Amina...Our son was killed." His anxieties take a different direction when he ponders "will you forbid them to wail just as you previously forbade them to trill with joy? Will you wail yourself or hire professional mourners? (497). Al Sayyid Ahmad no longer remains in control of his emotions nor thoughts. The man who had unquestionably denied his family many things including the freedom to laugh or cry in his presence begins to wonder if he himself would wail and allow his family the chance to mourn, thereby exposing the private sphere to the outer world.

Subjected masculinities in *The Swallows of Kabul*

Unlike *Palace Walk*, *The Swallows of Kabul* is set in the oppressive and degenerating Afghan society ruled by the Taliban (Levy 81). Written by Yasmina Khadara, a nom de plume for Algerian army officer Mohammed Moulessehou, *Swallows of Kabul* was first published in France (Davies Cordova, Filbin). Although a monumental piece of work in itself, the scholarship on *Swallows of Kabul* has mostly been limited to reviews and sociological studies on war torn countries (Wright). For the purposes of this study, I have focused on marginalized masculinity as present in this work.

The novel witnesses the crumbling of relationships and identity in the face of a society that is slowly losing its connection to humanity. The lack of connection is evident in the crumbling relationships and identities of two men, Atiq Shakut and Mohsen Ramat, along with their respective wives, Mussarat and Zunaira. These four characters struggle to hold on to the vestiges of their old selves while also holding onto their loved ones. This work highlights the pressures men feel to perform their gender roles and the fate of men who are members of marginalized masculinity.

The context of this work is the backdrop of a Taliban-controlled Kabul where an oppressive silence and depressing solitude reigns over the hearts and tongues of people. In such a case, men either become part of the ruling regime to make a hell on earth or they suffer in the inferno of the Taliban who, having seized Kabul in 1996, had introduced a harsh version of Islam that prohibited women's freedom and reintroduced Islamic punishments such as corporeal punishments for offenders, including death by stoning and amputations ("Afghanistan Profile").

Atiq Shaukat, one of the protagonist, chooses to work as a jail guard for the Taliban, spending his time watching over the victims who will be executed for

transgressing the Taliban codes. When Atiq is not waiting for victims to be delivered to their deaths, he goes about flaying his whip at no one in particular, inflicting external suffering which is reminiscent of his interior torment. On the other hand is Mohsen Ramat, who finds himself becoming a participant in the very act he disapproved of as a spectator, namely murder in the form of stoning a woman condemned for adultery. The masculinity under study in *Swallows of Kabul* falls under the complicit model where men who have chosen to not be complicit in hegemonic practices or are simply unable to do so are sidelined by the hegemonic practices. However, both men are drawn to a temporary identification with the hegemony, Atiq, the old fighter, with his whip and Mohsen in the act of being drawn into the stoning. It is when they turn away or attempt to distance themselves from practices of the current hegemonic model that they are marginalized as well.

The death of hegemonic masculinity in our protagonists, Atiq and Mohsen is apparent in the setting of a war torn Kabul where, under the Taliban's regime, humanity feels dead with no sight of justice. Being subjected by the active hegemonic masculinity symbolized by Taliban, marginalized men find themselves losing hope and conscience. In this case, men like Atiq either slip into depression and start smelling the 'musty reek of the next world' or, like Mohsen, lose the light of their conscience and morph into people they themselves do not recognize (Khadra 19). In their vulnerability, the two men desperately try to cling to hope personified by Zunaira to remind them of their purpose but are denied the comfort due to the oppressive silence that reigns over both the landscape and the people. The land is described as "nothing but battlefields, expanses of sands, and cemeteries" with a metaphorical death reigning over (1).

Here, we see two phenomena occurring that contribute to the marginalized masculinities. First, the men need some sort of control and purpose in their life, which is derived in part from the power they exercise over their private sphere and in the public domain. Without the autonomy of control in both spheres, they find themselves awkwardly placed with no purpose. Additionally, men find themselves wandering aimlessly and start losing confidence in themselves, unsure of who they are anymore. This is evident in both Atiq and Mohsen, for even though Atiq “spends his nights guarding condemned prisoners and his days turning them over to the executioner, he doesn’t have high expectations for his leisure time” (18). On the other hand, Mohsen, without any occupation, finds himself wandering the streets and becoming engulfed in the cries of a bloodthirsty mob intent on stoning a woman to death. When he comes “face to face with that moment of... confusion,” he becomes afraid of himself and loses all confidence in the man he has become (37). In both instances, the men seem to lack a sense of control over their fates. Their actions are not concerned with subjugating members in their domestic spheres; neither are they worried about pleasing people in the public spheres as was in the case of Al Sayyid Ahmad in *Palace Walk*. The actions of their gender as a whole are involved in committing meaningless and brutal acts of violence, for the novel implies that the Taliban have blotted out the meaning of civility and enjoyment from the minds of the Afghan people. Hence, the men are left with the choice of either becoming a part of the class that deals out this violence or becoming part of the class that receives it. Having done both, Atiq and Mohsen find themselves unable to identify with the only available gender identity of brutality as manliness. Even though they do commit acts of violence, they are unable to fully assimilate with the mentality of the Taliban and hence, find their sense of

identity and manhood crumbling when they are unable to perform a gender role which requires subjugating and harming people around them. Hence, through their choice of not participating in the practices of the hegemonic masculinity, they become members of marginalized masculinity.

Men with marginalized masculinities are denied not only power but comfort as well in both the public and domestic sphere. For instance, Atiq finds himself embarrassed for sharing his grievances with his friend about his dying wife's deteriorating health. Being unable to share himself with his wife, he seeks confidence and comfort in his childhood friend whose reproaches make him "aware of how indecent such confidences as this are, and he [becomes] cross with himself for having been unable to resist the morbid compulsion to display his dirty linen on the sidewalk in front of a café" (29-30). The alienation extends to the point where "they dare not look at each other" (30). Mohsen fares no better than Atiq because feelings or emotions of any kinds are forbidden to men even in the domestic sphere. Mohsen, who had found a friend and lover in his wife Zunaira, regrets confiding in his wife about his participation in the stoning of a woman sanctioned by the Taliban: he "understands he should not have confided to his wife what he refuse[d] to admit to himself" (38).

The marginalized man faces alienation, resulting in a downward spiral where everything necessary is inaccessible and the rest becomes intolerable. As Atiq muses, "*Astaghfirullah*, What's happening to me? I can't bear the dark, I can't bear the light, I don't like standing up or sitting down, I can't tolerate old people or children, I hate it when anybody looks at me or touches me. In fact, I can hardly stand myself. Am I going stark raving mad?" (42). In the alienation that both Atiq and Mohsen experience, their relationships are devoid of emotional attachment of any kind.

Ironically, both men are married, but the all-encompassing silence descends on their relationships with their wives, which creates a situation where the men are physically close but emotionally distant. The sense of loneliness is overwhelming, and these men without purpose find themselves estranged from men and women among them.

The dynamics of relationships between men and woman are very different from those presented in *The Arabian Nights*, for men like Atiq and Mohsen do not vie for power over women. Far from being based on lust and insecurities or even the need to dominate as seen in *Palace Walk*, the dynamics here aim for companionship and affection. Women are cast in a more positive light and are seen as crucial to the survival of men with marginalized masculinities. Thus, Mohsen begs of his wife, “You’re the only sun I have left, Zunaira. Without you, my night would be darker than the deepest darkness and colder than the grave” (35). The relationships between men and women are also devoid of hunger for power since Mohsen truly does seek the love of his wife. In the society of broken dreams where all sorts of beauty have been made virtually inaccessible and non-existent, Zunaira’s physical beauty represents the dreams and life Kabul once was teeming with.

Women’s beauty is integral in this case to men’s survival. Mussarat, Atiq’s wife’s, drives Atiq deeper into depression with her wasting body and failing health. In a country devoid of life and beauty, the loss of both life and beauty renders men with marginalized masculinity with nothing to call their own. However, Atiq finds himself filled with hope and love when in a strange turn of events, he finds Zunaira a prisoner in the jail he guards. However, it is Atiq who becomes a prisoner of Zunaira’s beauty. Having been previously limited in a loveless relationship with his wife that mostly functioned on gratitude and a sense of obligation, Atiq attributes his lack of

communication and love for his wife to his “feeling of impotence,” which has manifested as the expression of his failure in his relationship with his wife. Although he fulfills his conjugal duties and tries treating her kindly, their relationship lacks love or any sense of mutual attraction to each other. However, in Zunaira, he finds beauty, hope, and perhaps love. When he sees her uncovered face for the first time, he finds her “beautiful beyond imagination” and “like a dawn” (Khadra 144). Just as Mohsen found Zunaira to be his sun radiating beauty and life, Atiq too comes to rely on Zunaira’s unveiled beauty and presence to help him hold onto himself while he copes with all the things he has been denied under the hegemonic rule of the Taliban.

Women in this novel function as allegories of the past and present Kabul. Zunaira’s beauty is representative of hope and stability, a reminiscence of the Kabul that used to be, whereas Mussarat’s decaying body that is weakened by cancer is reminiscent of the Taliban, thereby signifying a slow and painful end. Both Mohsen and Atiq rely on Zunaira to find their identities and see in her the remnants of the men they used to be. When Mohsen is denied the sight of Zunaira’s face, he finds himself “going mad” (123). Without the sight of his wife’s face, he finds himself losing his bearings with a “mad desire to grab an iron bar and destroy everything in sight” (123). He begs his wife, “Don’t turn your back on me, Zunaira. I feel as though the whole world has a grudge against me. You’re all I have. Look at my hands imploring you; see how totally lost I am without you. You are my only lifeline. You’re my only connection to the world” (128). Compared to the self-sufficient men of *Palace Walk*, who needed women more out of a sense of adventure and chase, both Mohsen and Atiq completely depend on Zunaira for their sense of sanity. Mohsen, who strove to never change towards Zunaira, becomes abusive towards her when she denies him a

normal relationship and thereby shatters the dynamics of their relationship. His abusive action towards Zunaira turns him into the very man he was afraid of turning into, and his fears come true when Zunaira denies him the sight of the face which was his guiding light. On the other hand, Atiq, who dreams of a future with Zunaira, goes crazy without her, finally slipping into madness. Zunaira becomes the fading hope which evades the hands of complicit masculinities.

In conclusion, masculinities function parallel to issues pertaining to women. For instance, hegemonic masculinity seeks to control both men and women and thus encourages practices that support male dominance. Hegemonic masculinity also helps us to see the distinct masculinities that are constructed when economic and social power are not equally distributed at all levels of society. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity also sets up practices that more or less define what it means to be a “man” as pertaining to certain societies. For instance, Al Sayyid Ahmad through his actions defines how hegemonic masculinity functions, whereas his son Yasin demonstrates the functioning of a complicit masculinity. Conversely, *Swallows of Kabul* demonstrates how masculinity is deconstructed when men find themselves ousted from the hegemonic patriarchal system. Thus, their formation of masculinity comes to rely more on their acceptance by women and successful relationships with women as opposed to attempts to subjugate women. The patriarchal society values the current hegemonic practices which differ from time and society but what remains the same is the oppression under which marginalized masculinities are crushed.

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Chapter 4

HONOR KILLING IN LITERATURE

Defining Honor Killing

Imagine what would it be like for a woman to be killed for having a boyfriend or divorcing an abusive husband? Now imagine what it would be like for a father or brother to murder his daughter or sister for losing her virginity before marriage, being raped, or for being pregnant out of wedlock. These conditions are what often surround honor killing. The most commonly used definition of honor killing is the intentional murder of a woman by her kin (mostly patriarchal figures such as father, brother(s), and uncle(s), although women from the family may be involved too at times). The murder takes place to avenge the lost 'honor' which has been transgressed in any way, imaginary or real. The "crime" could be falling in love with an unapproved man, engaging in extra-marital or pre-marital relations, seeking a divorce, or breaking the norms of socially sanctioned sexual behavior (Welchman & Hossain 3). The list also includes illicit relationships, choosing one's own marriage partner, divorcing or leaving an abusive husband, being raped, or entering into homosexual relations (3). While, as this list shows, women are the primary victims of honor killing, men are sometimes victims of honor killing too. Incidents with male victims usually involve homosexual relations.

In essence, honor killing is a violent attempt to regulate a woman's sexuality and body, her emotions and actions. The violence is manifested subtly either through threats of force and withdrawal of family benefits or outright physical violence (Idriss

& Abbas 3). The code of honor perpetuates the idea that a woman's honor or *'ard* is a commodity that needs to be protected by the family and the society (Awwad 40).

Honor killing is partly perpetuated by the fact that women's bodies serve as a locus of honor for her family (Idriss & Abbas 3). Honor crimes violate the sanctity of life and basic human rights such as liberty, freedom of expression, and the right to choose happiness (3). Honor crimes have also been used as excuses in some cases to inflict violence on women primarily to subjugate them (45). Even the laws support and protect men who commit this violence in the name of honor.

A neo-orientalist view persists of mostly Muslim men as brutal murderers, especially after honor killing cases in immigrant families have surfaced in the media. It is impertinent to humanize these men, to understand what prompts them to murder their kinswomen. While it is clearly easy to see women as victims of patriarchy and traditions, it is important to acknowledge that men in some ways too are victims of the same traditions and patriarchal society that demands they murder their loved ones to satisfy collective notions of honor. To better understand the men who commit murder, I will examine the roles of men in two texts, *Honor: a novel*, by Elif Shafak and the memoir *Burned Alive: a victim of the law of men*, by Souad. These representations of honor killing both shatter the Neo-Orientalist image and adhere to it. Delving into the multiple factors that surround honor killing, I will explore the different forces that contribute to the practice.

Honor killing and Islam

Examining the scholarship on honor killing leads us to some important points about the relationship between religion and the tradition of honor killing. Firstly, honor killing is not sanctioned by Islam (Awwad 41). However, the reason honor

killing has been linked with Islam is because the practice of honor killing and honor-related violence is found in almost all Muslim countries and Muslim dominated communities (Abu-Lughod 17). Moreover, the silence by Islamic religious authorities has been interpreted as condoning the crime. However, honor killing occurs in other regions, cultures, and religions, although neither factors of religion or culture solely sanctions the crime. Violence against women takes place everywhere and is as much of a problem in predominantly Christian countries as it is in Muslim ones (Welchman & Hossain 57). There is also a misconception that honor crimes occur mainly against Muslim women by Muslim men (4). This viewpoint is supported by the 'Neo-Orientalist' view that Muslim men are violent, fundamentalist, and irrational (4). Honor killing has sullied Islam's image in the Western world. Once more, the Occidental gaze scrutinizes and defines what constitutes Eastern thought, religion, and action. However, the Occidental gaze does not take into account the Eastern voice, which in this context is Islam. The practice of treating women unequally is at odds with how Islam views the individual soul (4), thus imparting the much needed humanity to women which has been largely denied by people, not the religion. The honor that demands the blood of the guilty, often women, does not take into account that all holy religions forbid murder, including Islam (147). Even the self-righteous proponents of honor killing who murder to wipe out the shame from unintended pregnancies do not realize, perhaps, that Allah has forbidden the murder of all life including the fetus resulting from such pregnancies (147). Murder of pregnant women no matter what the circumstances of their pregnancies is considered a "brutal increase

in the crime of the murder in Islam” because an innocent child is harmed as well (148). Lastly, even in the Islamic world, honor killing is widely disputed because neither the hadiths (Prophet’s sayings that act as means of model behavior) nor the Sunna (the Prophet’s saying) endorse killing women (Appiah 153).

Understanding Honor Killing Today

Honor killing is neither new nor a characteristic of a backward society (Welchman & Hossain 61). It is the reality of women in modern days and times who are still controlled and constrained by men in their behavior and movements (147). Honor killing and honor related violence is not perpetuated by men solely. Women sometimes play crucial parts in these crimes as well. Women’s involvements in crimes is not just a phenomena in relation to “ethnic communities” because research in the western world has shown women’s lack of support for fellow victims where survivors of domestic violence are asked to put up with the abuse by their own mothers (Idris & Abbas 46). Thus, it is easy to see the behavior of people in issues regarding violence against each other is not governed by ethnicity.

The primary question honor killing raises is the presence of honor in the crime. By virtue of an action being a crime, the action itself is no longer honorable. The issue of honor is deeply tied in with morality because the standards of morality are perceived differently for men and women in most societies. In the words of Immanuel Kant, “morality is ultimately practical”; though it matters what we think and feel, in the end it is what we do that is most significant (Appiah xi). Kant’s idea about “the end result” is worthy of exploration because despite what the perpetrators feel about committing the crime, if the end result is murder, the action does not justify the

intention of wiping out the dishonor. Honor and morality in this context go hand in hand because the suspected deviation from the sexual moral code can risk a family's honor and an individual's life. While the whole practice is abhorrent, it is important to address the issue of honor from the sides of men and women's point of views.

Honor in Women

A women's chastity and sexual faithfulness is her honor. Honor resides in her body (Welchman & Hossain preface). Female genital mutilation is one way that perceived honor is protected. In honor-based societies, the hymen has come to represent a "socio-physical" phenomenon that not only signifies virginity but also establishes virtue and respectability for a woman (Abu-Odeh 11). A women's honor is located in her physical body as well as in her feminine aspects of "stoicism, endurance, subservience, domesticity, obedience, chastity, and servitude" (Idriss & Abbas 69). The feminine traits that adhere to societal norms have been likened to a social hymen, and the transgression of unacceptable social and sexual behaviors can bring about a woman's death as well (Abu-Odeh 12).

Women are expected to guard their own honor as well as that of their families. But since a women's honor is always in a precarious position, ready to be reduced to nothing at a moment's notice, her honor is not really hers to begin with. Since women are not respected enough to let them make their own decisions and live under constant danger of losing their honor, they are not treated with honor or dignity. Women's honor is best represented like a stained white cloth: once dishonored, the honor can never be regained. Female honor can also never increase, since the tendency is either to remain static or plunge in a southward direction (Idriss & Abbas 69).

Despite the precarious state a woman's honor stays in, women themselves police other women to ensure that societal and gender norms are followed (Welchman & Hossain 48). The primary question is why would women come together to inflict pain on another women, especially in a society where women are largely oppressed by various factors? Do women themselves attach their worth and other women's worth with their sexual behavior and bodies like men do? Perhaps not. The reason women themselves perpetuate the practice of honor killing by participating in it either directly (by agreeing to "wipe out" the dishonor) or indirectly (by spreading rumors that malign the victim's character) is because they themselves lack a support system and are thus dependent upon the material and ideological support of the men in their families.

Since honor is asserted through the friendships and relationships women maintain as well, women can serve as key elements in ensuring limits and can sanction the murder of other women, including their own daughters (Idriss & Abbas 48). This could either be to serve their own interests by keeping themselves safe in the long run or be driven by their beliefs in the notion of 'honor'. Even if women were to gather forces to save a victim, their good intentions might just backfire for them since they could all be victimized next. Along with lack of support, the concept of shame is also at work because admitting to other people about the abuse they face or another loved person faces at home would mean getting shamed potentially (44). In addition to the lack of emotional support is the fact that women might not have the economic and social service resources to break free from such a cycle. Hence, instead of breaking the cycle, perpetuating the practice might seem a viable option for the interest of themselves and their families.

Honor in Men

The other side of the gendered perspective is the male vision. Codes of honor construct not only a woman's identity but also a man's identity, and are thus crucial to understanding gender roles and meanings (Idriss & Abbas 44). Part of the problem is that men have yoked their identities with women's bodies and sexuality. Hence, a woman's vaginal/social/physical virginity is part of a man's identity which he feels the need to guard (Abu-Odeh 13). Women's actions and behavior become the means through which a man can be judged in society. However, the irony in the situation is though women are held accountable for their and their male relatives' honor, they are essentially treated with no honor. For one, the primary belief that women need to be "punished" for their "deviated" behavior is repugnant. This thinking perpetuates the belief that women are potentially capable of only criminal behavior, or are incapable of making the right choices thus placing the responsibility of policing their honor and behavior on men.

Despite the weight that men have attached to women's bodies and sexuality in regards to their own identity, the larger society also plays a role in men's involvement in policing women's behavior. The psychology of honor is rooted in a man's ability to stand tall and look the world in the eyes (Appiah X). Within such a system, honor or lack thereof does affect men too because dishonor can ruin the family's economic status (Welchman & Hossain 48). Moreover, the honor system also presumes that a man can never lose his honor through his own actions; only women within his household can lose his honor, thus, his actions mostly have no consequences over his honor. However, a man is required to avenge his honor. Not doing so would be considered shameful and his identity as a man would be called into question by society (Abu-Odeh 13). The honor codes put pressure on men to act out according to

prescribed gender roles that demand action. Lack of action can lead a man to be considered “unmanly” or a castrated man in the eyes of his society (13).

However, when it comes to sexuality, unlike a woman, a man is free to seek sex with women he is not married to whereas the women in these cases are expected to refuse him (Appiah 142). Even though in theory the practice of honor killing is applicable to men who transgress sexual boundaries, in real life, it is women mostly who pay the price. Hence, men can use this practice of honor killing to get rid of unwanted women with immunity (167). In fact, judicial decisions routinely mitigate sentences in honor crimes because the intention was to “reclaim honor” (49). Even though murder is illegal by law, judges offer exoneration to the perpetrators when honor is used as a reason (49). Such practices not only run contrary to moral codes that bind all human beings but they also provide men with a security blanket with which their crimes can be covered (49). Thus, the interpretation of law by men tends to protect men’s interests at the expense of women. However, honor codes are not about individual men controlling women (Welchman & Hossain 48). There are community norms and social policing with collective decisions to punish which could result in men getting killed also (48).

Honor in Modern Islamic Literature

I chose to explore the issue of honor killing from both a male and female perspective. Though no reason will ever be enough to justify the practice of honor killing, I think it important that we study the mentality of these men who believe in the notion that something as intangible as honor can be easily lost through actual or imaginary transgressions and reclaimed with a victim’s blood. Having established the various dimensions of honor killing will help us understand the contexts within which

these murders occur. The works I will be discussing are *Honor* and *Burned Alive* which will help in exploring the emotions of both the victim and the perpetrator. While a sociological and anthropological approach are key in understanding the complexity of the honor issue, literature helps to establish the emotions that are often amiss in the objective observations of the social sciences researcher. Literature here will help us better picture how the honor tradition ruthlessly destroys everyone who happens to come in its path.

Resentment and Remorse in Elif Shafak's *Honor: A Novel*

Written by Elif Shafak, *Honor* is the story of Iskender and his family. Growing up in a small village in Turkey and then in England, he struggles with becoming the man of the family and balancing his identity as a young Turkish man. When his mother, Pembe, starts an affair with an older man, Iskender feels it is his responsibility to save his family's honor and takes it upon himself to 'punish' his mother. In his angry outburst, he accidentally kills his mother's identical sister, Jamila without realizing the mistaken identity of the victim. It is in jail that he spends his time repenting and reflecting. Ironically enough, he spends almost all of his time in jail repenting over the death of his mother. When it seems he can reconcile with his mother, fate intervenes and Iskender learns there is no medicine for regrets.

Interestingly, Shafak chooses to start the story not from the perspective of Iskender but through his sister, Esmá. "But I had to tell the story, even if only to one person. I had to send it into some corner of the universe where it could float freely, away from us," she remarks (Shafak 1). Esmá's need to tell her story, and her mother's story, is extremely important to her because it is only by letting go of the pain of being abused and seeing her mother suffer that she can heal. As is in most

cases of honor killings and honor-related crimes, the offender in this case was none other than Esma's own brother. At the beginning of the novel, Esma identifies Iskender first as a murderer and then as her brother (1). It is important to note the urgent need Esma feels to break the silence despite the walls of conspiracy designed to keep her from telling her story. Family issues in Middle Eastern societies are mostly kept within the family. When the issue is about honor, the only voluntarily shared information is the act of avenging one's honor. Silence often surrounds the actual feelings about the murder and women are forbidden to speak out about their disagreements in such cases. Esma breaks all these rules when she breaks the silence and tells her mother's story.

One might wonder how Pembe felt about her son, her sultan (prince) whom she cherished since his birth. To Pembe, despite Iskender's growing emotional distance and controlling nature, he was still "her sultan, her lion, the apple of her eye" (337). Her motherly sentiments are full of prayers for him until her last breath. However, it is Iskender's voice that seems to shed light on an issue that has remained mostly one sided. Traditionally, discussions of honor killing have focused on the oppressed woman and portrayed the perpetrating man as a cold and heartless murderer. Iskender provides some insight into the 'stereotypical Islamic man' who has largely been portrayed as a ruthless killer.

As a child, Iskender grows up being loved and adored by his mother. This never changes, even after his worst mistakes. However, in his teenage years, his father abandons them to be with a dancer, thus placing a large burden of being a man on Iskender's young shoulders. In a way, the men in the novel, including Iskender mostly struggle to not become the very thing they hate. Yet in their resistance, they go deeper

down the path they most wished to avoid. In the novel, we first see this cycle with Adem, Iskender's father. Adem himself had an abusive father and wished more than anything to be nothing like his father.

Likewise, there comes a moment when Iskender sees himself morphing into his drunken baba. Iskender observes this phenomena, remarking to himself, "No, my father Adem Toprak did not beat his father or his children. And yet on that night, and on other nights in the ensuing years, he would easily lose his temper and turn the air blue with words that were full of pus and bile; he would smash objects against the walls, all the while hating the entire world for pushing him to the edge, where he feared the shadow of his abusive father was waiting to tell him he might not, in the end, be that different from him" (79). Iskender recognizes this because he himself reaches a point where he admits to himself "human nature being what it is, we hate most those we love most" (103). His love-hate conundrum manifests itself when his mother Pembe starts an affair. Though Pembe is a married woman with children, according to Middle Eastern honor traditions, sexual purity is expected of her despite age, social, and marital status (Awwad 44).

Not wanting to become an abusive and domineering figure like his father, Iskender finds himself morphing in the very person he wanted to avoid being, a process the novel presents as exacerbated by his status as an immigrant in the West . Ironically, despite living in England, he measures himself by the standards of honor of his village "where words, like wandering tribes, were of no fixed address. They travelled far and wide, scattering over the earth" (88). Those very words, which are gossip, are essentially at the center of a family's code of honor. Once shame becomes threatening to a family's honor, it becomes the concern of the entire family and the

society, no matter where they live (Awwad 45). Even if Iskender wanted to leave behind those standards, he feels he can not because he depends on his uncle as a father figure after Adem leaves them.

It is Iskender's uncle who reinforces the idea that the standards of honor that apply to men do not apply to women, for "women did not have honor. Instead, they had shame" (16). Iskender starts to measure his mother according to those same unfair standards. Going against the natural rules of a mother-son relationship, he feels it is important to control his mother's life. Thus, he starts to take on responsibilities not only of his household but also the role of his father as a policing agent in controlling women's behavior in his household. Hence, adopting the value system his mother had left behind, Iskender starts controlling Pembe's life, citing reasons such as "people were gossiping. Where there's smoke, there's fire" (50). His actions show he feels pressured into taking steps to protect his honor from gossip or the threat of tarnished honor (Awwad 45) in the Turkish immigrant community of England. Ironically though, there is no gossip against Pembe, neither in England nor in Turkey. The fears of a tarnished reputation are manifested in Iskender's psyche largely due to his uncle who had gained an important place in his life by helping him out financially when his own father, Adem, had abandoned the family.

In no way does Iskender represent a typical Middle Eastern man, if there is one to begin with. In fact, his story is anything but typical because he commits the murder not so much in the name of honor as much as an attempt to control his life. With his father gone and his conservative uncle as a father figure, he is easily led to believe that his mother needed "punishing" for her wrong doing. The idea of men punishing women itself is disgraceful because the practice of "punishment" insinuates perpetual

subordination of women and complete domination over women. However, this very idea of control over a woman's body and sexuality drives the notion of manhood and masculinity that Iskender feels he must attain to make his life meaningful.

Iskender sorrowfully recalls in jail almost sixteen years later his self-righteousness when at the age of sixteen, he had called his uncle and told him how he had "punished [his] mum for her illicit affair [...] from now on she'd never do such a thing again" (247). Moreover, he confesses that he "had stabbed her once on the right side of the chest. That would show her how grave her sin was" (247). The irony of the situation could not be more overstated as he himself at sixteen had impregnated his English girlfriend. However, being blind to his own actions in the face of honor codes because he was a man, he inflicts judgment and punishment on his mother for transgressing sexual codes. His immediate reaction resulting from the violence he inflicts on his mother/aunt is the belief that his "family's honor was cleansed" (247). In the present day, regret, shame, and anger overtake any other feelings he might have had. These feelings will be shortly explored in depth.

Despite the cruelty of his actions and the lack of remorse, the sixteen-year-old Iskender cannot be solely dismissed as a ruthless boy because he was largely a product of his environment. This is not to say in any way that his crime should be condoned. Rather, this is an attempt to understand the mentality of men who invest their identities as individuals and parts of society in the bodies of women they love. As Adem, Iskender's father put it, "Not everyone would understand this, but their honor was all that some men had in this world. The rich could afford to lose and regain their reputation, buying influence as perfunctorily as ordering a new car or refurnishing their mansions, but for the rest of the world things were different. The less means a

man had, the higher was the worth of his honor” (153-154). The complexity of the notion of honor has a strong tie to class and the setup of the patriarchal society where every man regardless of how much money he did or did not have had to have his honor.

Iskender fit the description perfectly because after Adem’s abandonment of his family, their financial situation had gone from bad to worse. Solely dependent at first on his mother’s income and his uncle’s generosity, he defined his sense of self and manhood by the behavior and bodies of the women in his family, especially his mother. While Pembe gives in to his controlling behavior, his sister, Esmâ tries to fight back only to be assaulted physically in return by Iskender. Though these notions of honor are incomprehensible in the western world, these beliefs carry a lot of weight culturally for certain people. These notions of honor define gender roles and gender dynamics. The definition of honor shapes life and in certain cases, death. This is best understood through the perspective of Adem, a man who himself was shaped by the influence and presence of honor or lack thereof in his life. As Adem reflects on his mother’s death, he muses “a man who had been cheated of the honor that was his due was a dead man. You could not walk on the street anymore, unless you got used to staring at the pavement. You could not go to a tea house and play a round of backgammon or watch a football match in the beer house. Your shoulders would droop, your fists would be clenched, and your eyes would sink in their cavities, and your entire being would be a listless mass, shrinking more and more with every rumor. No one would pay heed to you when you spoke; your word would be no more valuable than dried dung. The cigarette you offered would be left unsmoked, the coffee you drank bitter to the end. You would not be invited to weddings,

circumcision or your engagements, lest you bring your ill luck with you. In your own corner and surrounded by disgrace, you would dry up like a desiccated fruit. (154). Adem aptly captures the social disaster that awaits men who have lost their honor. Such men can no longer be participants in the politics of daily life. In a society that mostly relies on shame to control people, men use shame to control women while largely maintaining their own freedom. While women are isolated even among other women, men have the privilege of holding their head high and walking in public. But when dishonored, their words, which used to carry a lot of weight in the walls of their house and in the company of other men below them in the larger patriarchal system suddenly become as insignificant as a woman who has been dishonored. Regardless of the price a man must pay for his lost 'honor', violence and other means of control against the 'offender' are by no means justifiable.

This is something Iskender realizes in his time spent in jail. Having committed the murder of his mother/aunt in anger and desperation for a sense of normalcy and control, he reflects on his actions and is filled with regret, an image contrary to popular beliefs about real men who have committed honor crimes. However, before I explore Iskender's regret, I would like to explore his resentment and anger because this is something that is also largely absent in the portrayal of men who have committed honor crimes. While the primary motivation in honor crimes seems to be honor or rather the anger at having lost honor, Iskender surprisingly seems to have neither of those feelings. Instead, his anger stems from an inability to process the responsibilities he was forced to shoulder after his father left his family to be with a Russian exotic dancer.

In his eyes, while he suffered, his parents were pursuing their own happiness.

Iskender recalls the moment that changed the course of his and his family's life:

She was smiling. A surge of resentment rose inside me. Had I not told her that she was forbidden to go out, that she could not wear dresses that showed her legs? And here she was defying my rules, making fun of me. I followed her. She stared at a shop window, obviously in no rush to go home. I thought she might be waiting to meet her lover but no such thing happened. When we approached our street, she tripped, dropping her purse. An old khaki thing I had never seen before. As she was picking it up, she noticed me behind her. 'Iskender...' she whispered. (247)

From the above quote, we can clearly see Iskender makes no mention of honor.

Rather, he feels resentment. He feels his authority as a man being challenged when he thinks his mother had disobeyed him by going out and wearing certain types of clothing that he had forbidden. The pressure he feels also arises from his false perception about needing to control his mother to keep the family honor intact. Moreover, his anger also comes in part from seeing his mother happy and smiling when he is in misery. Jealousy overtakes him when he sees a different part of his mother that he had previously not seen.

However, his feelings of jealousy and anger turn into bitter regret when he realizes that above all 'honor' and other intangible notions lies the strong bond of love. Unfortunately, he slips into depression, but it is in the dark tunnel where he sees the light of truth. In his depressive state, he identifies himself not as a man who committed murder in the name of honor but rather as "we, the scumbags of the earth—the wicked, the fallen" (135). The evil of his actions becomes apparent to him as he becomes suicidal and is put on suicide watch. However, it is a vision of the apparition of his dead aunt, who he believes is his mother, which finally allows him to let go of his conflicted and violent emotions. He recalls the moment when he was born again

into a new man: “one night my mother came to me. Her ghost an apparition. Whatever you call it. I could smell her hair. It was that real. She stayed with me the entire night. Her face. Her eyes. I sobbed like never before. After that, I began to change and am a different man today” (139). His change of heart does not come at an easy price because he almost goes crazy in jail, haunted by his mother’s memories.

Iskender even reaches a point where he yearns for a normal relationship, not just with his mother and sister but with women in general. His yearning to be forgiven and seek his mother’s love are almost fulfilled when his younger brother explains to Iskender how he [Iskender] had confused his aunt Jamila for his mother and killed her instead. Unfortunately, after being released from jail, he finds out that his mother is dead having spent her last days in her village in Turkey. His previous notions about honor and tendencies to control women are replaced with wishful thinking about having a wife. He desires to know how it would feel to have a woman who would be aware of his weaknesses and failures better than him, who would have the “map of his soul drawn on her palm” and who would love him unconditionally while filling his life with pleasantness (101-102). Once he rids himself of all bitterness, it is easy to see that Iskender too has the same desires as any other man. He too seeks to love and be loved. Despite his mistakes and misguided beliefs, he is able to change for the better. At the heart of a man who seemed dehumanized and incapable of receiving and giving love lies the man who is able to love deeply after having faltered much.

Elif Shafak proves through Iskender that the much dehumanized representations of Middle Eastern men who have committed honor crimes are only one part of the picture, if not a distorted one. The west has largely seen these men in the Neo-Orientalist light as hyper violent fanatics who follow an oppressive and brutal

religion. However, Shafak, through Iskender's voice, shows that despite criminal behavior these men have known how to love and continue to do so. More than anything, Shafak has successfully portrayed the lack of connection between Islam and honor killing. Honor killing is clearly a cultural practice that is intricate in its roots and affects both men and women. Ideas about honor determine how men and women live their lives and the autonomy of power granted to the persons in the highly gender discriminated hierarchy.

As seen above, Iskender represents closely the plight of real men who have committed murders in the name of honor. He is not very different from the men interviewed by Turkish journalist Ayse Onal, who authored the book *Honor Killing: Stories of Men who Killed*. Onal brings to light the unheard voices of men full of regret and pain after they murdered their kinswomen in the name of honor. Just like Iskender, many of them felt pressured by their own family members such as their uncles to carry out the murder (Onal). The men, like Iskender, were also abandoned and rejected by the very society that had instigated them to commit the murders in the first place.

Murder Without Remorse in Souad's *Burned Alive*

Unfortunately, the other side of the honor murderer is the largely known image of the man who without regret or shame commits the murder and shows no remorse. This portrayal is present in the book *Burned Alive: a victim of the laws of men* by Souad. The book is heralded as a memoir although the authenticity of the events described have been deemed questionable by historian Therese Taylor⁸. Hence, for the

⁸ Article "Truth, History, and Honor Killing" from www.antiwar.com details the questionable logistics of the events described in the book.

purposes of this chapter, I will treat *Burned Alive* as a piece of fictional literature. It is based on real life events of an unnamed protagonist who narrates how her brother in law set her on fire for being pregnant out of wedlock.

The narrator falls in love with her neighbor next door, who promises her marriage. She is soon impregnated and abandoned by him. Upon the discovery of her pregnancy, her brother in law Hussein, who had been appointed to murder her by her own parents, proceeds to set her on fire. The author dedicates one short scene to describe the murder. She recounts how she already knew already that her brother in law was going to kill her that day as everyone else in the house had conveniently left, leaving her with the task of enormous chores. Souad describes the scene as follows: “He stands in front of me now and says, with a smile: “Hi. How goes it?” He’s chewing on a blade of grass, smiling: “I’m going to take care of you.” The scene evokes horror at the confidence of Hussein who already knows what he is going to do. In Hussein, we see the manifestation of the Neo-Orientalist image of the man the western audience has come to know very well. Hussein personifies brutality and a twisted mind that leads him to smile right before he sets his sister in law on fire. However, I would also point out that in no way does this correspond to every man who has committed honor murders. *Burned Alive* affirms the Neo-Orientalist image.

The rest of the passage affirms the Neo -Orientalist because as the protagonist is doing laundry quietly, waiting for something to happen, Hussein pours gasoline on her and sets her on fire. It is important to note that the scene described in the book is extremely short and there are no narratives from Hussein’s point of view in the book. In this scene, we only see Hussein accusing his sister in law in subtle ways by pointing out that she has got a big belly recently, meaning that she is visibly pregnant. He also

tries to bring out the truth about her pregnancy, forcing her to admit her situation. His portrayal is that of a man who is happy and willing to step in the role of a family hero even though the price is someone's life. His exercising authority over his sister in law will bring him great respect in the family and that is all he can think about.

In conclusion, the two texts show the two kinds of portrayals of honor murderers in literature. While *Honor: a Novel* succeeds at establishing realistic characters and giving voice to the tensions and forces that drive the custom of honor killing, *Burned Alive* sadly simplifies everything and puts the issue in binary terms of oppressed woman and maniac society/man. However, it is important to see such portrayals in literature to understand both sides of the issue. What interested me is both books were written by women about men who murder. Their different approaches could be attributed to the fact that Souad, if sources are to be believed, is the surviving victim of an honor killing. Lastly, Shafak successfully brought out the voices of real men in fiction just like Ayse Onal did with her journalistic book *Stories of Men who Killed*. It is important to understand why these men do what they do and what forces drive them. Women undeniably are victims of the honor tradition but then so are men in most cases. The tradition of honor killing is not about oppressing a woman; rather, it oppresses a family, and the perpetuating factor is often society. The fictional works have given human voices and experiences to the inhuman practice of honor killing. It cannot be denied that there is pain on both the perpetrator's side and the victim's side.

I would like to emphasize that I am not dismissing Souad's work here. Unfortunately, there are cases where men have been molded by society to such an extent that, like Hussein, they do not feel any regret or horror at having to commit these crimes. In their eyes, the honor crime does represent a golden chance to become

a man in their family and society's eyes. Perhaps, even if they do feel otherwise, they have been taught to keep those feelings hidden and put on a proud face because doing otherwise would be admitting their mistake to society. A literary analysis by the author here cannot possibly capture the complex experiences and emotions people go through, nor fully understand their pain. However, this essay is for all the victims of the brutal tradition. To all the men who are victimized by society and forced to murder and to all the women whose lives have been tragically cut short to fulfill the vengeful 'honor' tradition. May their souls rest in peace.

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Chapter 5

WHAT THE EYE SEES, IT BELIEVES: DEFINING GENDER BENDER SEXUALITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY

“To be a woman is a natural infirmity and every woman gets used to it. To be a man is an illusion, an act of violence that requires no justification. Simply to be is a challenge” (Ben Jelloun 70). The above quote from the novel, *Sand Child* by Taha Ben Jelloun aptly summarizes the crux of the novel’s protagonist, Ahmed’s dilemma. *Sand Child* itself is a highly acclaimed novel and the sequel to the novel, *The Sacred Night* won France’s prestigious literary award, ‘Prix Goncourt’. The Moroccan author is one of the six non-French authors to have won this award (Thatcher).

The highly acclaimed novel *Sand Child* tells the story of Ahmed whose destiny to be born as a girl is changed by her/his father who challenges fate that no matter what, his next child will be a male. This challenge is a revelation of the structure of the Arab-Islamic society which decrees that girls can inherit only 1/3 of their father’s wealth and hence a male heir is desirable to keep the property in the family (Thatcher). Hajji Ahmed, Ahmed’s father is tired of having fathered seven daughters and hence, to fight fate, resolves that the next child will be a boy regardless of the sex of the child. And so, Ahmed is born as a girl and made to raise as a boy, following all the social practices reserved for males. Ahmed’s growing body which has natural inclinations of a female anatomy is wrapped up and shrouded to cover up the growing breasts and onset of mensuration. The intervention of fate bought about by Hajji Ahmed has its own benefits as well as frustrations. For instance, growing up as a man, Ahmed enjoys

the rights and privileges that Arab-Islamic society bestows on males. However, despite the privileges, Ahmed feels mentally anguished over his identity as he feels confused over his identity.

A handful of scholars have written about *Sand Child* where they have studied the intertextuality connections and narrative structures such as by Marie Fayad. Scholarly work has also been focused on the post-colonial lens of *Sand Child* where “gender” serves as a metaphor of colonization of both the body and the nation (Saunders). Another scholar discusses *Sand Child* in terms of “confessional voices” and “developmental narratives” (Meyer 144). This study will examine Ahmed’s sexuality as a way to understand sexuality and gender roles in society. In order to understand Ahmed with his/her androgynous self, I will examine relationships between Ahmed’s parents, between Ahmed and his mysterious letter writer, between Ahmed and his wife, and lastly, between Ahmed and society.

Firstly, I seek to understand the relationship between Ahmed’s parents as a means to understand gender relations which will dominate Ahmed’s fate at a later time. In Ben Jelloun’s world, gender does not necessarily correspond with being identified anatomically as a male or female. Rather, the identification lies in the fulfillment of the roles assigned to each gender (Flaugh). For instance, Ahmed’s mother, though she is perpetually shrouded in silence reveals to us through her life that her existence is only meaningful when she can produce a child, a boy. Till then she too is a “natural infirmity” and is subjected to all kinds of torture including sprinkling “herself with she- camel’s urine” and “letting a dead man’s hand pass over her naked belly from top to bottom and using it as a spoon to eat couscous (Ben Jelloun 10).

On top of the tortures she undergoes from her husband's insistence, she takes it upon herself to punish her womb by striking at her belly (Ben Jelloun 11). She cannot be a complete woman until she produces a male child, till then she is an invalid, an argument perpetuated by her husband as well when he declares her womb as "inhospitable", "infirm", and "in need of cure" (13). Moreover, Ben Jelloun does not fail to add that the only time when Ahmed's mother had her husband's confidence was when she felt her life would have meaning, when there was a possibility of having a male child, even at the cost of defying moral, social, family, and religious expectations.

Even though to be a man is "an unjustified act of violence" bringing with it the power to oppress and rule, men themselves are not exempted from the subjugation of gender roles and bodily ability. For instance, Hajji Ahmed's self-identity as a man is colored by his vision of himself as a cursed man, "his face was inhabited by shame", and he considered himself "as a bachelor" discounting the fact that as a married man he had procreated seven daughters (9). Moreover, he becomes suspicious of his bodily ability to procreate, imagining that "his body was possessed by an accursed seed" or that he was a "sterile" husband (9). As his wife's body, his body is subject to being determined as able or disabled depending on their ability to produce a male child (Flaugh).

Having defined gendered roles comes the essential and inevitable question of defining the "challenge", of understanding the role of "simply to be". Understanding Ahmed/Zahra is probably one of the hardest tasks when one gets down to understanding the novel. An anomaly, neither a man completely nor a complete woman but always something painfully in between whose story is recounted by

multiple story tellers who each add their own layer to the story makes the character more complex. As Ahmed, in a dream recounts that he was different, he was a challenge, having escaped the fate of the daughters who “deserved” to be buried alive and yet as a man, he is dead when he shed his original identity of a woman.

The question of defining Ahmed is an essential one yet difficult because biologically, Ahmed is a woman yet he was raised like a boy. Even his biological growth is stunted or at least hidden as much as possible by bandaging his chest with white linen and “pulling the cloth so hard that [Ahmed] could hardly breathe (24). The suffocation he feels is the psychological distress that he endures in trying to develop an identity. Ahmed is made to repress all physical signs of his womanhood. Furthermore, he is trained psychologically to think and behave like a man as evidenced when as a little boy, he is forbidden to cry because he is “not a girl!” and tears were very feminine or when he is forbidden to put henna in his hair because “only girls put henna in their hair! (22-26). Social factors had trained him to behave like a man believing that as “a young man [he was] capable by his mere presence of rousing the hidden desires of honest women!” (24). It is questionable if Ahmed at certain point feels completely like a man.

Despite being perpetually unhappy with leading a double life, Ahmed does come to enjoy the privileges afforded for being a man in society. As a man, he is “an act of violence that requires no justification” (70). Since his father had changed the course of his destiny, averting for him the infirmity of being a woman, he happily accepts his condition and even likes the privileges and power it carries stating that as a woman, he would never have known them (34). Regardless of the psychological suffocation, he chooses to take power and accepts “adventure” (34). As is accepted of

men, he elects to become a complete Muslim man by choosing to become married (35). However, the dilemma lies in Ahmed himself because he is out of the normal scope of society, hence, seemingly normal choices like wanting to get married become abnormal and threaten to create chaos in his case. His reasoning for marriage itself is duplicitous because it seemed he wanted evidence of suffering worse than his, and thereby marrying his epileptic cousin would provide some sort of relief by knowing there are more oppressive conditions in life. His attitude towards his wife, Fatima is almost the same as that of a “colonial bourgeois contemplating a member of the native underclass” (Meyer 145). The relationship they share becomes one of hatred on Ahmed’s side and of sisterhood on Fatima’s side for Ahmed had come to hate her for her strong character that refused to submerge itself in misery for what fate had dictated, whereas, Fatima had found a companion in her suffering for she would hold onto her husband’s bed when seizures shook her, thereby forcing him to share in her misery and fate (Ben Jelloun 57). Fatima teaches him to have strength and to live life. She changes Ahmed’s views about women being weak for previously Ahmed associated “servitude” with Fatima when he thought about her. His plans on using her fail because in the end it is Fatima who successfully uses him, by making him partake in her fate and also by forcing him to realize who he really is. This is apparent when Ahmed is furious and disgusted by himself when Fatima initiates an intimate physical contact which reaffirms to him not only that he does not sexually desire women but also that his own unfulfilled desires have led him to become the calculating person full of hatred that he has become. At that moment, he hated Fatima for “being a woman” because he realized that he too was a woman and to hide this very “infirmity” he had subjected both himself and his wife to a life of suffering (58). This hatred resulted

from “a definite will to deny her gender” (Cazenav 440). Nevertheless, Ben Jelloun’s characterization of Ahmed sheds light into the essential question of identity and gender roles.

Furthermore, Fatima’s words that reaffirmed that Ahmed is a woman strike a chord because he admits that she had “a special kind of intelligence” (Ben Jelloun 57). Fatima lays bare his dilemma, claiming that she knows their “wound”, a common painful realization that both in their own ways are not a complete part of society. In El- Hoss’ words, “the term wound in French Maghrebian literature refers to one’s identity been torn apart between the Arabic and French language and between Christianity and Islam” (El-Hoss). Moreover, as El- Hoss puts it, in Ahmed’s context, wound refers to his split identity between two genders (El-Hoss). This idea crops up when Ahmed experiences his first physical signs of a woman’s body which he describes as “the wound. A betrayal” and thus begins his journey of “keeping up appearances” because it was “his will” (Ben Jelloun 32).

His successful stint of “keeping up appearances” ends with the death of his wife, wherein he plunges into solitude. The dilemma of understanding and defining Ahmed is felt not only by the readers but Ahmed himself. His feelings of suffocation and the need to keep up appearances are evident in his secretive ways of hiding his mensuration and his feeling of been locked in a glass cage. Moreover, Ahmed’s dilemma of identifying himself is apparent when he muses that he has his whole life to answer the question of who he is and who the other is who lives within him (38). His lack of self-identification leads him to a life of solitude and philosophizing where he comes to will his reclusion, to choose it, and ultimately to love it along with the suffering that comes from his loneliness and his unfulfilled desires (39).

A new chapter begins in his life when he starts receiving letters from a mysterious stranger who closely watches him. The stranger seems to understand Ahmed and is able to see the glass cage Ahmed has imprisoned himself in. This stranger, through a series of correspondences via letters evokes sexual desires in Ahmed, thereby awakening the woman in him. His desires that are evident in his dreams shock him to such an extent that he wakes up to find himself almost drowned in his bathtub (71). Despite the self-revelation that Ahmed receives after his experience of living with Fatima, it is not until he experiences his dream in the bathtub that he resolves to “retrace [his] steps patiently, rediscover the earliest sensations of a body that neither head nor reason control[ed]” (72). Thus begins his journey where he decides to observe his body to find any traces of the woman within (73). The newly awakened desires which had first shocked him were now delightful and he began imagining on how to act out upon them. However, because he still identified himself largely as a man, he has trouble imagining on how to act out on his desires as a woman since to society and even to himself, he was still a man. His frustrations and musings are not only signs of the awakening of a dormant and supposedly nonexistent sexuality but also an evidence of his soul searching. His return to being a woman begins with removing the bandages around his chest thus freeing himself physically and psychologically from the earlier suffocation he experienced from having to disguise himself. He acknowledges that the path to becoming a woman will be long for he will need to retrace his journey and reject the old habits that were ingrained in him (84).

His encounters with the outside world mirrors his confusion over his gender because in his chance meeting with the two women, both of them look for physical signs on his body to reaffirm their beliefs that he indeed is a woman. However, to him

the answer is still out of his reach as his journey had just begun. His confusion is mirrored when Um Abbas touches Ahmed physically to ensure if he is indeed a woman and reasons on his crying out “I wasn’t sure” to which he replies “Nor was I!”

Ahmed’s psychological identity as a woman is subtly made known to the reader while Ahmed himself remains unaware when he silently agrees to join the circus without resisting, thus reinforcing the belief that like women in his household, he too has internalized the practice of accepting what is meted out to him by those in power. Just as he wanted to emulate the practice of dying his hair with henna (which was forbidden to him as a male child) or secretly using strips of cloth for his mensuration, he has now on a psychological level picked up a practice that was meant for women to follow, which was submitting to their fate. Without quite realizing it, Ahmed actually starts becoming from the inside what he had learned to despise as a man, i.e. a woman.

Ahmed’s journey resulted more as a medium to understand himself and his body’s desires. Having lived a life that a twist in fate had favored him with, he wanted to embark on a journey to live a life that he was meant to live. However, Ahmed doesn’t just live the life of an average woman when he leaves his home. Seeking adventure and driven with the same sense of curiosity that had led him to marry Fatima, he accepts his new identity of Zahara (94). Her (Ahmed/Zahara’s) journey becomes a “reconquest of his being” (96). Considered a woman, Zahara gets the privilege of sleeping in the women’s tent and mingling with other women. The adolescent Ahmed who was once barred from the women’s world in the hammam once again gains access to that world, but this time as a woman. Besides, Zahra also learns to become docile and submissive in order to purge and forget (98).

However, her other identity, i.e. of Ahmed is not completely forgotten. Neither does she forget her family. Her acceptance of Zahra unleashes fear and guilt which manifests itself in her dreams when she imagines her father chasing after her to kill her because daughters deserved to be buried alive (100). Moreover, Hajj Ahmed as he appears in Zahra's dreams appears keen on punishing her because firstly she was spared the calamity of been a daughter since she "was different...a challenge" (100). But due to her rejection of the identity of Ahmed, she has become a traitor. As a son, she is considered dead and as Hajj Ahmed's daughter, she never existed because he did not acknowledge any of his daughters as his own. These fear and internal conflicts coupled with Zahra's guilt over her treatment of her mother expresses that Zahra will never be just a man or a woman. She will always remain a challenge having being forced to accept the role of oppressor and after reclaiming her identity as a woman; she has learned to feel guilt for hating members of her own sex.

In conclusion, the narrative about Ahmed/Zahra has no linear satisfactorily ending. Told by multiple narrators who intersperse their beliefs and ideas into what Ahmed/Zahra was really like, the very question about his/her existence becomes crucial. Nevertheless, Ahmed/Zahra ultimately is a sand child, nomadic in identity, sometimes a man and sometimes a woman. Even his/her physical location does not stay the same having left his/her house to wander and explore the world. Near the end of the book are four different endings to the story by four different narrators. None of these endings provide[s] the reader with a sense of completeness; on the contrary, the reader is left more restless.

Lastly, the different narrators and their approaches to the narrative leads us to the question of who Ahmed/Zahra really was and if despite having read so much about

Ahmed's journey into Zahra, if we are still anywhere closer to understanding our protagonist. Furthermore, as each narrator concludes differently how Ahmed/Zahra's last days were spent, the unreliability becomes more urgent. Hence, I have chosen to end Ahmed/Zahra's journey after his dreams of guilt and fear emerges

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Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

My thesis on gender and sexuality surveys diverse works that hold common themes of gender and sexuality which spans from the medieval times in chapter 2 (Gender Dynamics in *The Thousand and One Nights*) to contemporary gender bender (What the Eyes sees, it believes: defining gender bender sexualities in the context of the Islamic society). My work was an effort to understand the voices of the people the stories were written about and at best, my work seeks to uncover the trials and tribulations faced by men and women. I seek to uncover the burdens of each sexuality and to emphasize that both men and women carry the burdens of their gender. I

The dilemmas faced by women is present in chapter 3 (Feminism in Contemporary Arabic Literature) which provides a discourse on the societal and cultural expectations that become important factors in how women view their own sexuality. This chapter uncovers the scars that women bear on their bodies due to genital cutting because society views genital cutting as a rite of passage as well as a means to subdue sexual desire which will help society at large control women.

Moreover, my thesis also argues that men too bear the burden of the sexual order as depicted in chapter 4 (Variant Masculinities in Islamic Literature) and in chapter 5 (Honor Killing in Literature). These chapters discusses the social and political hierarchy of class that divides men into ranks, oppressing many while raising a few. This discourse also further discloses the societal pressures that men, especially, men without economic resources face when it comes to honor. Cultural and societal

forces regulate men's sexual identities as well which are partly derived from their standing in society. If this standing is threatened by women of their families who may or may not have broken moral or sexual codes, the men along with the women pay the price for the broken codes. For men, the price lies in having to murder their own female kin to pay the price of honor.

The future direction my work can take would be to study the largest structures that shape gender and sexuality in Islamic societies. These structures could be judicial and religious law such as *Shari'ah* that are shaping how men and women live their lives. Some future points of study could be the battle over hijab, the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, imposition of *Shari'ah* law, and women's life in Afghanistan. Some works that discuss issues that I could not carry through in the thesis are listed below as future recommendations:

Yacoubian Building by Ala al Aswany is a tale of modern and old Egypt struggling while men and women, rich and poor, straight and homosexuals, religious and fanatics try to make themselves happy and live a fulfilling life. Aswany uncovers the religious and moral dilemmas as well as sexual scars of a young man Taha who finds his life turned upside down after a brutal police encounter. This work is a volatile mix of gender dynamics mixed with race and classism which helps the narrative to be seen cohesively in multiple levels.

Another recommended read is *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela which follows the social downs and religious ups of a young woman who finds herself ousted from her previously rich life in Sudan. Having immigrated to England, Najwa finds herself embracing the hijab and Muslim ideologies of piousness and chastity. This work

brings forth the contested issue on why some women embrace the hijab and what true Islam really stands for.

Lastly, I would recommend *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. A postcolonial narrative, *Brick Lane* questions the role of women at home and in society, how women navigate spaces in immigrant countries, what temptations and tribulations await these women, and what they ultimately search for. A narrative woven among colorful characters such as Chanu, the husband who breaks the domineering, boorish man mould, *Brick Lane* provides a different insight into the married life of men and women which are not governed by passive –aggressive gender dynamics.

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