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## Lesbianism as Another Alternative for the Other: A Punishment or an Escape? A Study of the Saudi Novel "Al-Akharun" (The Others)

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### Abstract

Arabic literature has had significant contributions to the discussion of taboo issues, like sex, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recently, Saudi Arabian women writers have joined this group of authors by employing the themes of sex, the body, and other taboo issues. In response, some critics have accused these writers of trying to draw attention to themselves by exploiting such taboo subjects to increase their readership. In fact, these novelists have exposed new phenomena in conservative Saudi society and broken the stereotypical image of conservative Saudi women. This paper examines this growing trend through a case study of Saba Al-Herz's novel *Al-Akharun* (The Others).

**Keywords:** Sex, lesbianism, homosexuality, *sihaq*, Saudi women, *Al-Akharun*

### Introduction

Linguistically, Arabic uses two different terms for male homosexuality, namely *liwat*, and female homosexuality, or *sihaq*. Regarding *sihaq*, the subject of this study, the *Lisan al-Arab* gives the following definition: "*Sahaqa* (v.): Rub together or pound strongly; *al-sahq*: soft, smooth rubbing or pounding after pounding. The term *sihaq* (in Arabic) was given to this phenomenon because it was presumed that two women rub and pound their genitalia together during intercourse.

Homosexuality is defined as sex between people of the same gender. This term is commonly used in Western scientific books. The term *al-sihaq* is generally translated into

“tribadism” or “lesbianism.” The term does not necessarily express the sexual behavior of the person and it is not necessary that the person should express his sexual tendencies through actual intercourse. The term “homosexuality” consists of the Greek homo (ὁμός) which means “same” and “sexuality” which is derived from “sex.”

Arab writers have dealt with the themes of sex, its deviations, and its various rites in much of their creative work, which places the remote and prohibited aspects of sex at the focal point of the lens of literature, and shows the negative motivations that lie behind it, and its different results. For example, the novels *al-Khubz al-Hafi* by Muhammad Shukri, *Ra’ihat al-Saboun* by Rashid Boujadra, *Rihlat Ghandi al-Saghir* by Elias Khoury, *al-Su’al* by Ghaled Halsa, *Tawahin Beirut* by Tawfiq Yusuf Awad, and *Harouda* by Taher Jalloun have all dealt with the topic of sex. However, Hanan al-Sheikh’s novel *Misk al-Ghazal* differs from other novels in that it enters another world of sex by dealing with the subject of *sihaq*, and challenges the dominant and masculinist portrayals of *sihaq* and sex more broadly in Arab societies.

*Al-Akharun* (The Others), the focus of this paper, is a feminist Saudi Arabian novel that highlights the suffering of women, and their desires and needs, within a patriarchal society. It seeks to demolish the ready-made stereotypes of women, and it challenges any premeditated attempts to theorize what women face in their daily lives. This novel is classified as a “feminist erotic novel,” and is characterized by its daring eroticism that aspires to glorify the female body. Seba Al-Herz makes the female body the focus of the narrative. She celebrates the body and is engaged in drawing out its details and hidden aspects, and openly announcing its desires, inclinations, and whims. The book centers on sexual practices and love relations, including homosexual relations. Thus, the body in *Al-Akharun* is no longer the stereotypical body (re-)produced under the male gaze. Further, sex in the novel is no longer a “shame” or a clear “sin” that is controlled by moral restrictions; as a result, sex is no longer treated as taboo, but rather becomes an ordinary, every day matter.

### Historical Context

*Sihaq* is a phenomenon that preceded the people of the Prophet Lot, according to ancient literary works, material objects, and even the social values of peoples in the Arab region. Homosexuality was not a foreign concept to the people of this region, nor was it considered an

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abnormal social behavior. The Qur'an, as a representative of Islam, deals with homosexuality in the following verse:

وَلَوْطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ أَتَأْتُونَ الْفَاحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُمْ بِهَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ. إِن كُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّنْ دُونِ النِّسَاءِ بَ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ مُّسْرِفُونَ. (We also [sent] Lot: He said to his people: "Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds." (Surat al-A'raf, Verses 80–81)

This verse was intended for Lot's people, whose story was mentioned, albeit with different details, in three different Abrahamic religious texts. Nonetheless, homosexuality did not become a phenomenon until it was accepted by Lot's people in Sodom and Gomorrah in modern-day Jordan. Evidence of this is embedded in the semantics of the Arabic term *liwat*, which means "homosexuality" and is derived from the name "Lot." The term *liwat* in modern Arabic is still used informally to indicate sexual activity that is performed between two males.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence of homosexuality in ancient Egyptian society is also reflected in cultural artefacts, including mythological narratives, as we see in the story of the conflict between Horus, the god of the sun, goodness, and justice, and Set, the god of darkness, chaos, desert, storms, and foreigners. *Al-sihaq* was also known among ancient Egyptian women, but evidence of this is infrequent, if not rare. Some archeologists give weight to the argument that there are scenes that show some women that embrace each other and play with female signs and symbols. Moreover, there are intimate scenes between women in the area of "Tel Amarna"<sup>2</sup> However, it is not easy to distinguish in this art between faces, as male and female features were frequently used interchangeably. Further evidence can be found in the *Book of the Dead*, where Nist Neb Tashiro (970 B.C.) says: "I have never had sexual intercourse with any woman in the Temple." This sentence implies that by denying that she had sexual intercourse with any woman in the Temple, Nist is indicating that female homosexuality was known and probably accepted by society outside of the Temple. Besides, the text does not refer to the prohibition of homosexuality or contempt for it; it only proscribes practicing sexual intercourse "in the Temple," which was an arena for some popular celebrations of "fertility" that witnessed erotic activities among men and women, especially among the Temple Mistresses.

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*Sihaq* was also mentioned in the *Book of Dreams* during the late ages in Carlsberg Papyrus 13, which mentions an admonition and gentle reproof of a certain woman by another because she, “dreamt that she had sex with another married woman.” Several sources, including the statements of the Egyptologist Cassia Spakoska indicate that the text “condemned conjugal infidelity but did not condemn the act of lesbianism in general, which implies the probability that *Sihaq* was accepted to some extent in the Egyptian society” (Graves, 2010, p. 66).<sup>3</sup>

Among the Arabs, *sihaq* was described by Abu al-Qassem Hussein bin Muhammad al-Ragheb al-Assfahani (2006), who said that the first who practiced lesbianism were the women of Lot’s people, when they noticed that their men were having sexual relations with other men and deserting the women. He notes that:

When women had strong sexual desire, they started rubbing their thighs against each other and found pleasure in that. Then they rubbed their buttocks and felt more pleasure. Then they rubbed the anus with the anus; the clitoris clashes with the clitoris and the vulva (الهنُّ [al-hun] in Arabic<sup>4</sup>) with the vulva and the water flowed from them, and when God destroyed the men and women of Lot’s people, there was no more liwat (homosexuality and lesbianism). (Al-Assfahani, 2006, p. 102)

According to other historical literature, the first Arab woman who practiced *sihaq* was Ruqasha bint al-Hassan al-Yamaniya, who fell in love with Hind bint Amer bin Sa’sa’a, the wife of al-Nu’man Ibn al-Mundher Ibn Imru’ al-Qays, who was nicknamed Abu Qabous, King of Hira. One day, Ruqasha bint al-Hassan al-Yamaniya came to visit Hind. Hind welcomed her in her palace. Hind was extremely beautiful and fresh and Ruqasha was attracted by her. Al-Nu’man used to make raids and, as a result, he was absent from his wife for a long time. Thus, Hind and Ruqasha slept together on his bed. They fell in love with each other so strongly that they felt like husband and wife.

During the Umayyad Caliphate, the desire for sexual intercourse increased and *sihaq* became widespread in the city. It is said that the news about the spread of lesbianism reached Hubai al-Madiniya, who was a “lustful” woman who lived during the rule of Marwan Ibn al-Hakam (Al-Assfahani, 2006, p. 111). Hubai taught the women of the city the “art of love” and therefore, they called her “Hawa’/Eve.” She approached the women of the city and said: “I was told that you developed something called ‘*Sihaq*’ by which you do away with men.” They replied: “This is not

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our intention, but it is better than pregnancy, which causes a scandal” (Al-Assfahani, 2006, p. 111–112.) During the Abbasid period, which is called “The Age of Sex” by some researchers, some people called for sexual activity between men (*liwat*). Similarly, a new group of women called for *sihaq*. In fact, an intense battle took place between *liwat* and *sihaq*. Some women began by referring to “sexual intercourse” but soon moved to *sihaq*. Others left *sihaq* and moved to “sexual intercourse” (Al-Assfahani, 2006, p. 111).

There is no book about sex that does not refer to *sihaq*. For example, the book *Nuzhat al-Ashab fi Mu’asharat al-Ahbab*, written by al-Samaw’al bin Yahya bin ‘Abbas al-Maghrebi, devoted an entire chapter to the reasons why some people divert sex from its “natural course.” He also dealt with the reason why some intelligent and wise people prefer the “youth” to the “female salve,” and the reason why some women prefer *sihaq* (al-Maghrebi, 2008).

Writing on sexual subjects flourished in a strange way and became a social necessity. In addition to writing, illustration of pictures and colors were added to the various depictions of sexual positions and poses. The book *Nuzhat al-Albab fi ma la Yujad fi Kitab* (1992) devotes a whole chapter to the subject of *sihaq*, called: “*Fi Adab al-Musaḥ aqat wa Nawader Akhbarihin wa Mulaḥ Ash’arihin.*” Similarly, *Rujou’al-Shaikh ila Sibah*, which was translated by Ibn Kamal Pasha at the request of the Ottoman Sultan Salim the First, there is a chapter with the title “*al-Adwiya al-Lati Tutib al-Suhq ila al-Nisa' Hatta Yashtafina bihi ‘an Jami‘ ma Hunna Fih, wa Ya'khudhna ‘Alayhi al-Hayaman wa al-Junun*” (1981).

Sexual activities also flourished in the writings of physicians of the era. It is said that the physician Ibn Masawayhi once noted:

I read in the classical books that *sihaq* is created when the feeding mother eats celery, watercress, and sweet clover. If she eats a lot and breast-feeds the baby, she passes that to the labia of the baby girl, where itching takes place, and the remedy of this sickness is prostitution.

Several intellectuals and writers of the time also established rules for sexual intercourse and *sihaq*, and even developed names for certain sexual acts. Women classified types of *sihaq* as *dafda’i* (like a frog), *shira’i* (like a sail), *mukhalef* (opposite), *mu’alef* (similar), and *istiklab* (like a dog). They also prescribed manners for *sihaq* in which they described how the two lesbians (*sihaqiyatan*) should

act. These manners were more strictly followed among the rich aristocratic classes than among the working classes where the practices were sometimes banal and hackneyed.

Lesbianism is based on *al-zurf* (literally, cutism) and therefore, lesbians call themselves by that name (*al-zurf*, or, the cute). In Arabic, if someone is called *zarifa*, it is implied that she is a lesbian. It is said that Ahmad bin Yusuf al-Tifashi described an event that he observed saying:

I observed a lesbian woman who had a lot of money and property. She spent on her beloved one all her gold and silver. When she spent everything, and people blamed her a lot, she gave her [lover] all her property, which was about five thousand dinars. Lesbians used to put a lot of perfume on their body and hair and take care to wear clean clothes and have the best kinds of food and vessels, and wear the most beautiful available things. (1992, p. 125)

### ***Al-Akharun: A Case Study***

In one of his letters to his mistress Louise Colet, Gustave Flaubert says that “it seems that the highest and most difficult thing in art is not that it makes us laugh or cry, not that it arouses desire or anger in us...but that it makes us dream” (Winock, 2016, p. 94). It is not an exaggeration to say that Seba Al-Herz’s novel *Al-Akharun* arouses desire and anger, as if it were written Flaubert’s advice in mind. What Seba Al-Herz describes in her novel is a deep and penetrative look into freedom; it represents a daring leap within Arabic literature, not only because she is a woman writer but because of the themes and issues she chooses to write about from within a deeply conservative society.

Saba Al-Herz is a pseudonym adopted by a young Saudi Arabian author as a symbolic penname. From her wonderful novel, we understand that she is a distinguished, intelligent, and gifted individual who threw aside all the worn and inherited traditions of religious practice, sexual relations, and even politics within the conservative Saudi society. She candidly reveals the strange practices that happen behind closed doors in a society that is strict and conservative, and that has minimal, if any tolerance for women who cross traditional boundaries.

### ***Exploring Al-Akharun: Narrative Technique, Writing Style, and Meaning-Making***

The novel is narrated in the singular first person, which is an autobiographical narrative technique. Nevertheless, we cannot say that the novel is autobiographical because we do not know anything about its writer. Consequently, any approach that is based on a connection

between the writer and the heroine seems, in my view, impossible. Because the female narrator is a young Shiite woman, the reader might question the legitimacy of the narrator, and therefore might ask how much of the narrative truly belongs to the narrator and how much is projected by the writer onto the narrator. Does everything that the narrator say belong to her, or does it also belong to the writer? The question becomes more important in regards to the story's linguistic and philosophical aspects. Probably, what makes the reader believe that the words are the narrator's own and not the author's is that the narrator is a university student and has made some attempts at writing. Actually, she takes part in publishing a magazine, and consequently, it is not surprising that she has read about Jean Paul Sartre, Milan Kundera, Patrick Suskind, and other writers who are mentioned in the book.

In fact, we had better ask: Who are the "Others?" And, why did the publisher choose to print the word *akharun* in red while the name of the author on the cover of the book is printed in black? Here, it is worthwhile to remember Sartre's statement, "The Others are hell!" For the protagonist, "others" are also hell. She has drifted into *sihaq* after she was raped at a party during the war. They "persuaded" her that having sex with a member of this specific political party represents her duty to their struggle and freedom. The protagonist recalls:

In the course of time, the 'ground floors' of my body were turning into a place of human garbage. When the others become rotten corpses dwelling in me, they refuse to leave and leave me in peace. At night, the situation becomes unbearable; there are screams, noise, accumulation, and [the] redefining of the borders of the authority of each one on his private place in my space. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 5–6)

She continues, saying that "the Others are always the others; they are my first care and cause of fear; I do not want anyone to touch me, no one" (p. 40).

The question might return after the reader has finished reading the novel. The "Others" for the protagonist are all like that, which confirms Sartre's statement. Employing this statement to introduce the novel is successful. Besides, the writer's adoption of it is not arbitrarily made. What the Others have done to the narrator has made her a deformed creature who cannot live a normal life. She has become an abnormal person who lives a life in which she is dissatisfied.

In her analysis, 'Alya Shu'aib maintains that this cruelty and assault of the woman raped by men, who had nominated themselves as her protectors, made the woman denounce their



guardianship of her. She sees them as the people who steal the most from her (2001, p. 59). Therefore, she spits them out of her life and moves to live in a more comfortable and pleasant world—the world of women. She sees that there are several axes that push the normal woman to the world of lesbianism: violence, sexual harassment, and rape. She also refers to the existence of emotional or sexual deprivation that is hidden in these women. She says that the woman hates the man because he has become a model of harm and pain. For her, the woman as sexual partner becomes the human and emotional substitute with whom the protagonist can communicate with, love, and have sexual intercourse (2001, p. 59).

While reading the first pages of the novel, we might also wonder: Why does the protagonist use the word “Others” to refer to men and not to women? The reader soon discovers that the protagonist’s relationships are not limited to women; she also has relationships with males. The word “Others” does, in fact, include both men and women. Thus, the protagonist makes it clear that the “Others,” in her view, represents those that made life a “hell” for her.

### **Sihag in Al-Akharun**

Although the subject of the novel is not new in Arabic literature, *Al-Akharun* is distinctive in that it is written specifically about a lesbian character. The main purpose of the novel is to highlight the details of this character, her suffering, her dreams, her breakdowns, and the manner of her mutual interaction with her environment. The novel focuses on the intimate relationship between the two main characters: the protagonist, whose name is not mentioned, and Dhai, who rapes her. The protagonist, whose name is not given, is a young lesbian girl who studies at al-Dammam College and is Shi’i. She practices writing and provides social services through religious magazines at *al-Hussayniyya*, which are congregation halls for the Shiite commemoration ceremonies to offer condolences. She sometimes has fits of epilepsy:

Every night, my last call before I close my eyes was that my secret will not be revealed, and I will not go under the gallows of ‘pity’. I have never felt ashamed of my fit[s] of epilepsy. My sickness constituted a horrible defect in comparison with my physical perfection, but it is a probable human defect; now I feel ashamed of my saliva leaking from the side of my lips. (pp. 95–95)

The protagonist lives in the al-Qatif region and tells of a stormy love story between her, another young girl, and other girls who are her friends and colleagues: Dhai, Darin, Balqis, Sondos, Hidaya,

and Heba. She describes these lesbian relationships in minute detail with respect to their sincerity, intimate emotions, and the pleasure and ecstasy that they experience during sex. She describes the conflicting thoughts one experiences between physical sexual desire and religious thoughts, social prohibitions, and taboos. The protagonist also experiences feelings of repentance and regret for engaging in these practices.

In addition to the university campus at al-Dammam College, *al-Hussayniyya* became a place for meeting and making new acquaintances. It was the most convenient place for the young girls to make dates, listen to each other, and experience certain revelations without any obstacles. The girls could exchange their feelings and agree on intimate meetings, which usually took place inside their bedrooms in their private dwelling places, where they slept naked together on one double bed like husband and wife.

Consequently, a conflict arises between the urgent and exciting physiological needs of her body on the one hand, and the traditions of her society on the other. She considers the strict and closed religious doctrine with its taboos and prohibitions. These rules do not allow Saudi women even the most basic human rights. The protagonist feels confused as to how to coordinate her physical and sexual needs:

Though I participated in organizing successful programs in the activities at the end of Ramadan, I did not feel that I submitted [a] suitable apology to God or to myself. I remained drowned in shyness and a feeling that my guilt is dripping from my limbs. I understood in advance that I did that under the motivation of temporary consumption so that I would not meet myself and have conflict with[in] myself. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 15–16)

The protagonist soon falls under the control of Dhah, one of her intimate friends, and with whom she has sex continually—once in the protagonist’s house, and once in Dhah’s private room at the house she lives in. Dhah plays the role of the “lover” and the protagonist the role of the “beloved”:

The speech kept silent, Balqis’s madness remained with me; her desire [for] me dried [up] gradually and then died completely...I met you and loved you. I loved you since our first handshake at *al-Hussayniyya*...I have been closing my eyes on you and open[ing] them on you. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 146–148)

In a dialogue between Dhah and the protagonist, we read Dhah’s words as she suffers from strong jealousy about her beloved: “Do you know I will kill you if you betray me? Did anyone

precede me to your body? Answer me? There was no one there. Are you happy?" (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 49 – 51). In a long dialogue with herself, Dhai says: "Now, and as you are my own possession, I now know that birthmark beside your left breast; I can now touch that red nipple, and kiss that red nipple, and lick that red nipple, and sleep on that red nipple, and after that, I fear that you might be tired of me and leave me" (pp. 49–51).

Such descriptions border on the sadistic, as seen in this excerpt:

I was under her with my two hands tied to the bed post, unable to move the wrist of my left hand...I was afraid to open my eyes...I pulled something from her dresser and blindfolded my eyes...Then she surrounded me with her legs...she was tearing my clothes randomly...I was naked, and she was uncovering me, searching in my body [for] another smell...then like someone who has suddenly woken up to see himself walking while he is asleep...then she stood up all of a sudden...she untied my hands and took off my eye band. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 155–157)

The protagonist's relationship with Dhai is also defined by emotional volatility, something the author emphasizes throughout the novel. As the protagonist notes about one of their intimate meetings:

She drew me with my hand to a door that opens onto a small hall in the kitchen and slammed the door behind us. We rushed into a feverish kiss; our hands were moving loosely; our breaths were heaving; I kissed her and kissed her, and said intoxicatingly: "Damn you! You drove me crazy!" She laughed and her smile stung me; it pumped in my blood a great desire, with more craziness. (Al-Herz, 2006, p. 137)

It is worth mentioning here that Arab writers have opposing views about "the lesbian relationship." As Shu'aib (2001) notes, lesbian relationships, like the one described here between Dhai and the protagonist, share certain power dynamics with heterosexual relationships, with one partner attempting to control the other. Others see lesbian relationships in a different light, noting that the drive to occupy and possess one's lover, as is commonly seen in heterosexual relationships, does not exist in the same way. Shu'aib writes further that in the lesbian relationship, the fact that societal concepts of "virginity," "honor," and gendered expectations surrounding pregnancy take on different meanings in such a way that lesbian partners might feel safer and more secure with each other than heterosexual partners do (2001, p. 27).

This point of view contradicts Abd al-'Atti Kiwan's (2003) point of view. Lacking nuance, he argues that such writing about lesbianism is akin to writing about prostitution. Kiwan does not see any literary value to such writing:

The creator here is a woman who writes about herself, about her meeting with the other, about her lust and deprivation, about sexual intercourse and its color; it is a woman who adopts the role of a prostitute or a prostitute who adopts the role of a writer; she interrogates the body and uncovers its vocabulary in a special language. (2003, p. 57)

Evelyn Accad (1990), however, strongly criticizes such opinions as based in men's fear of women's sexuality opinion (p. 19). Ibrahim (2011) discusses the idea of "sharing" or "participation" in lesbian relationships versus the feelings of male superiority that affect women in heterosexual relationships. Regarding heterosexual relationships, Ibrahim says that it has another important feature: The man "empties" the female of all her feminine energy through his virile dispossession, which is based on the idea of "victory" and "domination" (p. 131). Female homosexuality, in contrast, is based on the foundation of "partnership" or the idea of unlimited mutual "giving" between similar bodies. There is no monopolization in these relationships because the idea of mutual satisfaction is the motive for the relationship.

This is confirmed and observed by the novel when about dispensing with men:

We, women, [have] commit[ted] the same mistake since the beginning of life. We abridge all our life in the man, who stamped his name on us; we leave our parents, friendships, certificates of our studies, our dreams and our small and trivial things and engage in worship in the praying niche of a man. The man, in turn, does not do much. He keeps the motion of his circles and their momentum. They expand more and more and we stay merely a point within that crowdedness. That is really an exaggerated simplicity. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 53–54)

The protagonist's relationship with Darin, another friend, also supports this claim. She notes that "with Darin, I felt that I possess sufficient safety t[o] make me put my heart on the table beside us, without fear that she will steal it when I am not paying attention to her" (p. 178). She continues:

She was tempting me slowly; she li[t] two candles and whispered to me about scandals that made my body tremble; she was always neutral, if I wanted to involve her as a third party, between me and my body. With her, my body parts have different names, including the secret ones. Our seconds had special expressions, and I discovered that what I considered cheap obscenity that does not suit Darin and her great kindness, is a kind of

dirty obscene excitement. Who said that obscenity does not arouse a feeling of elation? Our physical relation was “sex” and not what I used to call by hinting [at] it as “that thing.” (Al-Herz, 2006, p. 178)

However, the societal pressures of heterosexuality eventually affect the protagonist. As she notes: “I craved in [Darin] a man who will not come. In return, Darin wished to be that waited for man who would suddenly appear!” The heroine of the novel suddenly pays attention “to the missing human being in my life; there was no man, in my last wishes, and the smallest and most hidden ones; there was no man” (Al-Herz, 2006, p. 216). This leads the protagonist to turn back to heterosexual relationships, as she expresses her disgust about her own “deviation” and “abnormality” regarding her past lesbian relationships. Using the internet, the protagonist falls in love with “Omar,” who differs from her in his religious faith. From his name, we conclude that he is a young Sunni man with whom she becomes physically close to in a moment of desire.

But, the novel ends with a tug-of-war between the “natural” and the “deviant.” At first, we read:

Don't you want to hug me? I want [to]. She inserted her hand under my shirt. Why do you torture me? Kiss me before the cigarettes spoil the taste of your mouth. She kissed me and our kiss was extinguished quickly. (Al-Herz, 2006, pp. 261–261)

This is followed, in the novel's last section, with a sexual encounter between the protagonist and Omar.

Omar, kiss me now!

Why now?

I will not ask for it another time.

Are you sure?

Let us say that if you do not kiss me in three seconds, I will take the kiss by myself.

She goes on to say:

Omar, take me, take all of me, and he took me, took me, not as Dhari took me. In all our fighting in bed, neither in that light way that Darin exerted on me, nor in that fear and disgrace of a high heel on my body for years. From time to time, as a result of [an] excess of lust or love, I was about to say: ‘Do something so that you will not stay outside me. Don't steal your babies from me!’ It is strange that I do not miss our bodily action and do not feel that my body yearns [for] what used to be; what I specifically miss is those little small details that do not draw attention within the intertwinement of the image and its mess. My fingers are on the dimples of her cheeks...her sadness, her gloomy face when she is

sad. We missed ourselves asleep, I on my back, and she on her abdomen. Each of us is looking at the other; the world is disappearing and empty, except for us. I miss her voice, the hoarseness of her voice when she wakes up. I miss her playing with the sleeve of my shirt, when she talked, and I miss her forefinger in my mouth. (Al-Herz, 2006, 289)

### **Damned Literature**

Seba Al-Herz adopts the method of realistic narration in her novel *Al-Akharun*. It is a serious novel that is written with an unprecedented artistic and historical awareness among Saudi novels. She allows her voice to be free and does not fear the violence of censorship. In my view, the novel belongs to what is called “damned literature,” which is dominated by conditions of psychological confusion, relations of intra-personal violence, and tragedy that underlie deceptive appearances, all of which is understood by the main characters. As a narrator, Al-Herz she enters the depths of the characters and delves into both the individual unconscious and the collective unconsciousness to cleverly depict the lesbian relations between her novel’s main characters. The novel is tragic novel with little irony: It draws a picture of a dark and gloomy life that is lived at the margins.

Overall, *Al-Akharun* is a powerful novel that opens up possibilities for Arab women writers in the future. In this context, it is important that we realize the new reality of all women writers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The novel *Al-Akharun* confirms the truth of researcher Fawziya Abu Khaled’s statement that foresees the emergence of a Saudi feminist trend that aspires to end the isolation of Saudi women through creation of a “feminist empire.” She believes that Saudi women are on their way to overcoming all the obstacles that restrict her humanity (Selim, 2004, pp. 214–220).

### **Conclusion**

Since the 1980s, feminist literature has been characterized by a tremendous revolution against the prevailing literary and social norms in Arab society. Today, *Literature of the Bed*, including books that center female homosexuality, is spreading extensively in the Arab library. The main issue in this literature is not the distinctiveness of its narration or daring descriptions of normal or abnormal forms of sexual activity, nor is it its description of sexual practice as an expression of social culture and relations. What is distinctive is its definition of the concept of “freedom” as a matter of personal freedom, first and foremost. The novel *Al-Akharun* exposes

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what goes on in religiously conservative societies, and the extent to which such strict social norms negatively impact non-heterosexual individuals. The main point here is that, in her imagined narrative writing about lesbianism, Al-Herz expresses her objection, resistance, and refusal to men as rulers over women. Seba Al-Herz's style is characterized by frankness, daring, and courage. It is also interesting, enjoyable, smooth and simple but inimitable. There is no doubt that she is very lucky and very brave, and because of her anger, she has turned her revelations into a loud cry whose echoes have reached beyond the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and begun to be repeated in all the Arab countries.

The novel *Al-Akharun* is one of the most exciting novels in Arab society in general and especially in Arab Gulf and Saudi society, in particular owing to the deep and severe criticism that it introduces. Seba Al-Herz's novel is a call for the end to the suppression and terror that is practiced on the individual's social and intellectual liberties in general and on women in particular. In my view, Seba Al-Herz possesses the secrets of novelistic writing and its keys.

Finally, I believe that the novel *Al-Akharun* will remain a source of controversy and debate thanks to Al-Herz's courage and in-depth treatment of a topic that is considered one of the most difficult and taboo issues of discussion in the Arab world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information about Liwat (homosexuality) and the story of Satan's temptation to Lot's people, see: Ben Ibrahim Ahmad al-Hamad (1994). *Al-Fahisha Inda Qawm Lot/Lewdness among Lot's People*. 1st ed. Al-Riyadh: Dar Ibn Khuzayma, p. 86

<sup>2</sup> Al-'Amārnah is an extensive Egyptian archaeological site that represents the remains of the capital city newly established (1346 BC) and built by the Pharaoh Akhenaten of the late Eighteenth Dynasty, and abandoned shortly after his death (1332 BC). The area is located on the east bank of the Nile River in the modern Egyptian province of Minya. The name for the city employed by the ancient Egyptians is written as Akhetaten or Akhetaton. Akhetaten means "Horizon of the Aten." The name Amarna comes from the Beni Amran tribe that lived in the region and founded several settlements. The ancient Egyptian name was Akhetaten. The city was built as the new capital of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, dedicated to his new religion of worship to the Aten. Construction started in or around Year 5 of his reign (1346 BC) and was probably completed by Year 9 (1341 BC), although it became the capital city two years earlier. To speed up construction of the city most of the buildings were constructed out of mud-brick, and whitewashed. For more information, see Lucas and Harris (2012).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see: Manniche (2001); Shaw et al. (2002).

<sup>4</sup> "Al-Hun" (الهنّ) in Arabic) is one of the Six Nouns (in Arabic grammar). The term is used to refer to the woman's sexual organ (farj /vagina). For more information, see: al-Mu'jam al-Wasit (2011).

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