



Masculinity, Manhood and Machismo in Radwan El-Kashef's *Arak El-Balah*

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In a region where gender differences are deeply ingrained and sedimented within its social structure, it is no surprise that the rhetoric of masculinity and femininity has long been reified in various Arab cultural and literary productions. This rhetoric has also been projected in diverse forms and from various vantages. Moreover, while it is true that substantial studies have been devoted to the discourse of femininity, much still needs to be said about the manifestation of masculinity, manhood and machismo in modern/postmodern Arab productions and publications. More specifically, much needs to be said about the multifarious exultations of masculinity, the ambiguities it entails and the subversion and perils it has undergone in Arab literature, cinema and poetry. Thus, this essay will attempt to highlight the rhetoric of masculine hegemony and its subversion as it has been manifested in the award winning film *Arak El-Balah* (1998) by prominent Egyptian director Radwan El-Kashef¹. Therein, it will make clear that in traditional societies challenging masculine ideals are bound to trigger irrepressible violence.

To begin with, much has been said about the world of Radwan El-Kashef and the realm of his films. Born and raised in the southern part of Egypt, this native of the Sa'id is said to have "brought his home village alive in the imag-

ination" of his friends and viewers, through "the innumerable stories" he captured on and outside the screen. This attachment to his southern roots, says Hani Shukrallah, stems from and is intrinsically linked to his devotion to his mother, and "through her to the world of women." According to Shukrallah, notes found in the papers of this renowned film-director read:

The world of women, for me, is a world of symbols, concealment and allusion. It is a reality different to that which is lived. For me, the world of women is a storehouse of genuine feelings, expressed indirectly, magically.

In fact, this world is deeply decoded within the "magical and mundane" reality of his films. From his first graduation project *Janoubiya* (The Southern Woman 1984)², to *Leh Ya Banafsaj* (The Blueness of Violets 1992)³, *Arak El-Balah* (Date Wine 1998), and *Al-Sa'her* (The magician 2001), El-Kashef has weaved multifarious stories of women; stories that encapsulate their dilemmas, weakness', desires and - above all - convoluted reality. Consequently, El-Kashef's films are said to be "situated within a woman's world" and "seen through a woman's eyes" (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, Internet). While it is true that El-Kashef's films are concerned with and work through as

well as with the world of women, the rhetoric of masculine hegemony is still an intrinsic element in them. In fact, *Arak El-Balah* (Date Wine) best indicates and exemplifies this discourse.

This essay will examine the rhetoric of masculinity, manhood and machismo in *Arak El-Balah* and will address the following questions: How is masculinity constructed and negotiated in the film? Are male characters able to conform to the ideals of manhood or do they subvert and flout these ideals? What happens when a male is secluded in a world of women? For instance, does close proximity to women play havoc with the making of male identities? Or is the rhetoric of hegemonic masculinity dependent on and fostered by stereotypes of women? In other words, is masculinity supported, constructed and confirmed through such notions as virginity, shame and honor? Also, what happens when a male is unable to conform to the ideals of manhood? Ultimately, what are the consequences of subverting conventional male ideals in a place as traditional as the setting of the film itself?

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Arak El-Balah is one of El-Kashef's most acclaimed films. Since its release,

the film has been lauded by both critics and viewers alike. It has also appeared in various international and regional festivals and has received numerous awards including: the Silver award in the Carthage Film Festival (1998) and the African Film Festival in Milan (1999); Jury and Youth Award in the Montreal African Film Festival (1999); the Jury Award and the award for Best Actress in the Namur Francophone Film Festival in Belgium (1999); as well as Best film in the International Festival for Mediterranean Cinema in Tetuan, Morocco (1999) ⁴.

Like most of El-Kashef's films, the story takes place in Upper Egypt, in an imaginary village in the district of Sohaj. The plot of the film is as follows: all the strong men in the village depart in search of wealth leaving behind women, children, an old man and a young boy - named Ahmad - who is on the threshold of adolescence. Thus, begins a new precarious phase in the village, a phase where strong, frustrated, angry, and befuddled women attempt to defy individual and collective hardships, where Ahmad dreams of climbing the tallest palm tree in the village and where uncontrollable violence erupts once the men return.

Nevertheless, at the center of all this is also the story of the making of a man in a community of women and the ambivalence this inflicts.

The initiation of Ahmad (played by Hamdy Ahmad) into manhood is very much an intrinsic part of El-Kashef's cinematic narrative. In fact, from the opening scene, which captures a throng of men bidding their wives, mothers and grandmothers adieu, Ahmad's milestone journey into manhood begins. For as the men depart, the females turn to him and laughingly proclaim that "you are the only man left"; a phrase very much indicative of the new role that will be ascribed to him and which he has yet to fulfill. Elsewhere, a woman addresses a boy by telling him that they will make him a man no matter the challenges. Yet, the scene that follows does not only capture the festivities that take place following the birth of a baby boy, it is also a celebration of Ahmad's instigation into manhood. Amid bouts of ululations and songs, the women dress Ahmad in proper men's attire, hand him a gun and watch him fondly as he mounts a huge stallion. Evidently, the ritual underscores the surface transformation of this young boy into what is presumed to be manhood. It is also an early indication that it is the women in this community who will bolster/destabilize Ahmad's manhood, who will indirectly construct/deconstruct his masculine identity and who will instruct him as to what it takes to be a man; a factor that is bound to create a lot of havoc in the shaping of his masculine identity.

After all, Ahmad is secluded in a community of women. Instead of learning about what Chenjerai Shire calls "the gender of certain material objects that are vital in the shaping of masculine identity" (150), Ahmad learns about the objects and idioms employed in a woman's space. Thus, instead of listening to the banter of males as they boast their hunting or fighting expeditions, as they assess their weapons or even as they share sexual experiences, Ahmad learns that a "bikriyah" is a woman who is pregnant for the first time, that one needs to prepare hot water to help the midwife deliver babies and that special feminine rituals take place once women give birth. He also listens as women comment on their appearances and watches as they cook and share secrets. Ahmad is, in short, exposed to the repertoire of feminine speech and to the complexities/banalities of their everyday existence. Thus, what is at play is the incorporation of values and principles that may be defined as 'feminine'. Moreover, almost all the women in El-Kashef's film have a mind of their own; they are strong enough to face adversaries and confront hardships.

Therefore, amidst this community, Ahmad finds no impetus to conform to the typical male ideals of his society nor is there any compulsion to act 'macho'. For the young

man, it is enough that the little boys cling to him, that the women ask him to run errands and perform tasks that require more physical strength and that he has managed to kiss Salma (played by Shirihan), his sweetheart, on the lips and has asked for her hand in marriage. This, however, soon changes when he is confronted with a series of humiliating incidents that destabilize his naïve delusion of manhood, emasculate him and propel him to perform macho acts.

The first incident that flouts Ahmad's manhood occurs when he seeks a group of male entertainers from outside the village to participate in a celebration and falls prey to their ridicule. The men scathingly remark that they will only communicate with men and that they will not approach the village if there are no men. What is evidently at play here is a discourse of manliness among men themselves. The men scorn and indict Ahmad because he has remained with the women and has not joined the others in the struggle to find more fiscal resources on behalf of the group (villagers). After all, as David Gilmore notes, one of the core characteristics of masculinity is to function as "an inducement for high performance in the social struggle for scarce resources." Since Ahmad has yet to display his manhood by a certain "code of conduct that advances collective interests" (qtd. in Toshiko; Online), he loses credibility in the eyes of all men.

Consequently, he feels devastated and bewildered. He also begins to realize that masculinity is "a prize to be struggled for, a rigorous test of skill, power, or endurance" (Toshiko). On a broader level, the incident highlights a key masculine discourse in traditional societies; that there is no concept of manhood without machismo, that the necessity to conform to the parameters of male ideals and to situate oneself within an image of machismo is very much part and parcel of becoming a man, particularly in the Sa'id. Thus, Ahmad's attempt to pursue his life-long dream of climbing the el-iliyah, the tallest palm tree in the village and one that only heroic men can ever approach, is a struggle to situate himself within masculine parameters. Yet, before the young man even has a chance to perform what he perceives to be the 'macho' deed, another incident occurs that further decenters his notion of his manhood.

Ahmad finds out that one of the married women (Shifaa) in the village has committed adultery with a stranger and is pregnant. Instead of fulfilling his duty as the only man in the village, Ahmad demonstrates 'weakness' by not washing the family and village honor. In short, amid Salma's pleading, Ahmad shoots an animal instead of the 'dishonorable' woman. By failing to conform to the male ideals of protecting one's honor and shame, Ahmad exhibits what other men would describe as a male malaise, i.e. getting in touch with one's sensitive part. Thus, he exposes a fun-

damental glitch in his manhood and becomes 'effeminate' in his own eyes before anyone else. In an attempt to reassert his manhood, the young man tries to shoot the woman's lover. However, he does not possess the 'manly' precision required for such a task and his target manages to escape.

The consecutive and degrading events heighten Ahmad's intention to climb the palm tree. The young man needs to perform what Frank Pittman calls "the Big Impossible" for the attainment of a "heroic masculinity" (182). Thus, he seeks a silent consent from his grandfather (the only one liable to give it) and proceeds with his mission despite the reservations of the women. As Ahmad mounts the tree, the women - clad in black abayas - stand in awe and fear, all the while attempting to stop him. Yet the young man is heedless to their warnings; the climb is an essential element in his ascent into manhood. As he clammers to the top of the palm tree and plucks the ripe fruits, Ahmad's notion of who and what he is undergoes a marked transformation in his eyes and in the eyes of the female masses.

For thereafter, the women's attitude towards Ahmad changes. Salma no longer derides his 'boyish' behavior. Rather, she accedes to his wishes and repeatedly says: "Set as much conditions as you want, you are my man and it is your right to do so." Elsewhere, Salma reassures him that her father - upon his return - will bless the marriage, after all "where else will he find such a strong and able man." Salma is not alone. One married woman tries to seduce him, but stops short when an older woman rebukes her behavior. In short, the women's newly established stance towards Ahmad helps construct and affirm his manhood and dominance. Yet, El Kashef soon subverts this rhetoric of masculine hegemony by a sequence of symbolic events that force the viewer to reread and reevaluate this traditional rhetoric and perhaps question its appropriateness in light of the changes that are sweeping this region.

As Ahmad basks in the exultations of masculinity that the women bestow upon him, Shifaa, the adulteress, burns herself amid implicit encouragement from the women. Shifaa's suicide carries nuanced interpretations. On one

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level, it is a subtle condemnation, perhaps by the women themselves, of Ahmad's simulacrum manhood which was too frail to commit the deed. In other words, despite the admiration the women shower on Ahmad, there is a deep-rooted part of them that continues to be influenced by patriarchal idioms of honor and shame. Consequently, these women unintentionally demean Ahmad's manhood when they exhibit no qualms about urging Shifaa to go ahead with the suicide - a factor that is cinematically suggested rather than stated.

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Moreover, the fact that Shifaa herself took the initiative to perform what Ahmad should otherwise have accomplished is perhaps a subtle message that Ahmad's manhood and through him all conventional ideals of manhood in the Sa'id are slowly disintegrating and are being eliminated by women such as Shifaa; women who choose to become perpetrators of their own fate and destiny, even when they do so out of despair. The suicide, hence, asserts their individuality rather than their feebleness. Thus, the scene forces a re-evaluation of our understanding of manhood in this region.

If Shifaa's suicide awakens Ahmad's masculine insecurities, the death of his grandfather (perhaps the one clear icon of traditional masculine values) devastates him. On a more symbolic level, the death of the old man further enunciates and enforces the idea that the traditional discourse of male dominance, as depicted in the character of Ahmad, has also reached a tragic trajectory in places as remote as the Sa'id. Nevertheless, in a patriarchal society that is so deeply enmeshed in its values, El Kashef will soon reveal that the subjugation of masculine ideals are bound to create tragedies in the lives of everyone involved and may, perhaps, lead to death. Therefore when El Kashef's camera tracks the old man as he leads his horse into an endless land that represents death, he prepares us for what is to come.

Yet prior to these revelations, Ahmad seeks yet another antidote to his manhood by sleeping with Salma. The love-making is triggered by the despair of Salma upon the death of Shifaa and by Ahmad's need to attest to his masculine virility. In her essay "Variant Masculinities, Variant Virginites: Rethinking Honor and Shame," Nancy

Lindisfarne explains that the "seduction of a virgin [is] a widespread idiom which conveys a notion of essentialised, almost heroic virility." Thus, the act is necessary for "defin[ing] the very essence of maleness," (89); an essence that, even thereafter, Ahmad continues to unconsciously resist. In other words, although Ahmad enacts many of the common patterns of masculinity prevalent in the region, he still recoils from them. For instance, in the discourse of honor and shame that is entrenched within the Sa'id, men expect deflowering to occur on the wedding night only. Yet, Ahmad does not even muse over this notion. He does not incriminate Salma's sexual capitulation nor does he deem her an 'immoral' woman. On the contrary, Ahmad anxiously awaits the return of Salma's father to marry her.

Ahmad's incongruous attitude towards certain social values pertaining to this region reflects the opposing forces residing within him. Ahmad clearly stumbles between two forces: the one insists on practicing conventional ideals of manhood and the other flouting and contesting these ideals. Moreover, his ambiguity does not merely spring from the fact that he has dwelled in women's spaces for long, but also from the flux of social and political practices that are emerging around him. These changes include the immigration of many male villagers, the individuality of women and the fact that the Sa'id is no longer as remote and isolated. Strangers such as the male entertainers can now gain entry into the village. Yet, through the final crisis of the film, El-Kashef predicts and emphasizes that these changes will not be as easily absorbed as those changes that have swept other regions.

The anticipated crisis springs forth with the homecoming of the men. For when the latter arrive, they do not placate Ahmad's insecurities nor do they appease the women's vent up emotions that have been caused by the many economical and social hardships. Rather they trigger uncontrollable violence and tragedies. This is because the immigrants soon discern that much has changed in their absence. The women are no longer weak, emotional and fragile. Instead, they exhibit individual autonomy and what the men perceive as 'rebellion' and 'disobedience'; one woman refuses to sleep with her husband because she is not in the mood, another smokes openly and still another asserts her opinion without any reservations. These occurrences baffle and enrage the men.

Since in societies as the one depicted in the film, a woman's behavior is an index to a man's success in controlling them, the men blame Ahmad. They reprimand his inaptness at monitoring the behavior of their wives, daughters and granddaughters. Even more, they soon consider him an accomplice in the 'detrimental' transformations they detect. Nevertheless, the condemnation only explodes when Salma's father discovers that his daughter

is pregnant and learns of the real reasons behind Shifaa's death, concluding that her lover must be Ahmad. The discoveries lead to the conviction of Ahmad.

The men cunningly plan Ahmad's execution to avenge their honor and to re-establish their dominancy. Perhaps the reason behind their actions is best explained through Lindisfarne's notion that "the cause of men's violence toward women (and men) are twofold." These include "a man's commitment to ideals of honor as judged by neighbors and others, and his dishonor, which lies not only in the actions of women but in those of men who have challenged his authority as a surrogate father, brother and neighbor and rendered him socially impotent," adding that, as a result, "violence may be a means through which the illusion of wholeness is reasserted" (87). R. W. Connell also emphasizes that "the hierarchy of masculinities is itself a source of violence, since force is used in defining and maintaining the hierarchy" (217). Thus to reaffirm their disintegrating masculinities and to avoid the downward spiral of the patriarchal pecking order, the men take action - violent action.

First, they invite Ahmad to one of their gatherings, a factor that flatters his manhood. They, then, repeatedly boost the young man's 'machismo' at having climbed the palm tree. Salma's father also stresses that Salma will become his only if he succeeds in climbing the palm tree again and in the dark. Ahmad's need to prove his manhood to the men and his eagerness to marry Salma drives him to comply. But the moment he climbs the tree, the men shatter its root and the young man is killed. As the gigantic tree falls, chaos erupts. Also, the

last symbol of traditional manhood and machismo is obliterated.

The women, no longer willing to confine themselves to their passive roles, rise-up against the tragedy. Led by Salma herself, wives, daughters and granddaughters angrily march forward in protest against the violent actions of their kith and kin. Hence, one of the film's major messages is made clear; due to the erratic social and political forces, conventional ideals of manhood in the Sa'id have reached a crisis and the rhetoric of masculine hegemony is no longer subject to the same discourse. However, the conflict between dominant and subordinate masculinity that the locals of such a place experience and will experience may have lethal and detrimental consequences because their rigid values and traditions are so deep-rooted. In short, El Kashef highlights that quelling the rhetoric of masculine hegemony will shatter the whole social structure of this traditional region and will, in turn, be fiercely resisted.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that the rhetoric of masculine dominancy and its collapse are one of the major discourses of the film. Through this discourse and through the actions of the characters, the film emphasizes the inherent influence women had, and will continue to have, in undermining and fostering a man's sense of himself. It also highlights that a woman's behavior and local idioms such as honor, virginity and shame are tied to and affect the construction of male identities. More importantly, the film exemplifies the harsh reality of many traditional villages in Upper Egypt and elsewhere that have been thrown off guard by the changes beleaguering them. Consequently, in an effort to shield themselves from such currents they respond brutally and, sometimes, viciously.

END NOTES

1. El-Kashef died of a stroke in June 2002, at the age of 50, days before the release of his film *Al Saher*.
2. *Janubiya* won the Ministry of Culture's prize for Best first film in 1988.
3. *Leh ya Banafseg* won the Cairo International Film Festival's Special Jury prize in 1992.
4. *Arak El-Balah's* other awards include: Best film, directing, editing, script, actress and photography in the Egyptian National Film Festival (1999); Best Film in the Angles Film Festival in France (1999) ; Best photography in the South African Film Festival in Johannesburg (1999).

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