

A "Hollywood" Fancy

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In an "Interview" with Michael Bacos on March 24, 2002, the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury was asked an interesting question: since Lebanese writers no longer have the benefit of a major event, the civil war, to inspire them, what are the issues they are writing about in Post-war Lebanon? Khoury's answer to this was that Lebanese writers are writing novels and are trying, through them, to express their lives', a rather general answer to a question that, in my opinion, needs more in-depth study. Indeed, the fiction written in Lebanon in the post-war era can be described as diverse. Writers are broaching on a wide variety of topics, some still related to the civil war and the repercussions of the war, and others to modernization, the challenge of globalization, the internet, and sexuality. Indeed the war writers were generally more concerned with ideological, political and military issues and the problems of daily survival, and less with personal issues related to the family, male female relations and sexuality. Nevertheless, some women writers did write a number of novels and short stories related to women's freedom and sexuality such as Hanan Al-Shaykh, Maha Samara, Rafif Fattouh, Ghada Al-Samman, and others . Today, sexuality is a topic that many writers both male and female, are dealing with in new and innovative ways, where heterosexual as well as homosexual relations feature either directly or indirectly. It is interesting to note here that women are writing more explicitly, while male writers appear to be more reserved and allusive. The reason for this is that homosexuality is still seen as a direct attack on manhood and many writers fear that anyone who

writes about it is automatically accused of being one. Nevertheless, the past ten years have witnessed a proliferation of fiction dealing with private issues, including sexuality and the body. Among such works are the novels of Ilham Mansour on lesbian relations, pornography, as well as straight and aberrant sexuality. Rachid Al-Daif has published a number of novels including *Learning English* (1999), *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself* (2001) and *Forget the Car* (2002) where he deals with topics such fatherhood and the authority of the male patriarch, sexual practices void of feelings or emotions, and masculine identity in the aftermath of the civil war. Such topics clearly shock the reader into re-considering the generally accepted views on marriage, sexual relationships, virginity, and homosexuality, in the unsettling world of post war Lebanon.

In Lebanon today, and at a time when many people are questioning the extent of political freedom accorded to individuals as well as groups, it is clear that writers are exercising a great deal of self-discipline when it comes to political and religious issues despite the fact that Lebanon is the only country in the Arab World where the publishing industry is not subject to government censorship. Indeed, many of them have opted to write about sexuality, a subject they believe is more tolerated by the government though it can get entangled into political and religious issues at any time. As the Egyptian writer Edward Al-Kharrat succinctly puts it, censorship in the Arab world is a "beast" that lurks in waiting and attacks its victim whenever it deems necessary. According to Al-Kharrat, "If there is a bit more free-

dom available now than it was fifty years ago when it comes to the erotic in literature or, what is referred, to as pornographic literature, this space is too narrow and fragile and subject to erasure according to the whims of the politicians and under pressure from any authority be it religious or military. It is true that the ghost of dark threats and chaotic oppression is still there but the artist who is faithful to his message will not be intimidated by these ghosts." ²

A bird's eye view on some reviews published in the Lebanese papers on works of fiction written in the wake of the civil war reveals that reviewers notice a prevailing use of "pornography" in Lebanese fiction. Writing on Al-Daif's *Forget the Car* in *Mulhaq AN-Nahar*, Aql al-'awit asserts that the "pornographic light burns" cruelly without any feelings or emotions. According to the reviewer, sex in Al-Daif's work is commodified and is transformed into "a sort of service that takes place at a personal level and sometimes at a group level." Revealing his reservations about such kind of writing, al-'awit adds sarcastically that the reader will be faced with "very modern characters" too much "a la mode" and will discover hearts that are automated and devoid of feelings. These characters are quite capable of immersing themselves "in purely pornographic needs" without batting an eye. Accordingly, the novel is seen as nothing more than a "sexual, pornographic film" whose subject matter does not transcend brute sexual encounters. The reviewer suggests that such practices are alien to our culture though he adds sardonically that perhaps Al-Daif appears to be more familiar with what happens behind closed

doors.³ Similarly, writing about Abbas Baydoun's first novel *Blood Test*, Suleiman Awdeh asserts that "the sexual instinct and the sense of smell are the only means through which the characters communicate. Sex is a means and a tool, and one always smells the lust that fills the air. It is a kind of sex that comes from a pornographic memory, lacking any feelings and burning with lust."⁴

The question that arises is why this concern with sexuality? Is this about lack of subjects after the war or is this an escape from disappointing ideologies that sanctioned and supported a vicious war? Indeed, the works written during the war were largely dominated by commitments to ideology or to the struggle for socialist justice and for the liberation of the country from alien forces. Little space remained for private concerns of the individual, except when these happened to symbolize the collective situation of failure or frustration. Today, many Lebanese writers have shifted to individual problems, particularly issues related to sexuality and gender relations. Within this context, the general trend is to name names and shock the reader by breaking taboos. But why are Lebanese writers so intent on shocking readers? One reason for sexualizing their writings through the depiction of sensationalist scenes is perhaps to produce best sellers, but this is hardly feasible in Lebanon where the best known writers rarely sell more than 200 to 300 copies. Another reason is a vigorous "Hollywood fancy"⁵ nourished by a desire by writers to imitate Western writers and the Western way of life, and create a world that, according to many people, is alien to our culture and values. For instance, Najwa Barakat's novel *How Great!* (Ya Salam) is compared by the poet Shawqi Bzey' to Paul Auster's novels that are rife with "murder, lust, sex, provocation and perversity."⁶ A third reason exclusively related to women writers, is their desire to ensure that the freedom they acquired in the war is maintained and solidified, and that they do not have to return to the domain of the private space the way Algerian women were forced to do after the revolution. Writing on gay sexuality, some women such as

Mansour want to interrogate a rigidly divided world in which heterosexuality is the norm, and to break free from the stigmatizing logic of gender differences where male is privileged over female. Another reason is the challenge of modernization represented by a strong awareness of changes in gender, and a reaction against the unmaning war. In his interview, Khoury asserts that the war ended because in a sense it died. It reached a point where it became totally meaningless. Did the sense of failure felt by many men after the war affect their masculinity? Did the war unman its men? Indeed, some works of fiction reveal that many men began discovering that in their absence (in the war) women entered the public male space and began negotiating power relations that the men thought to be essential and unchanging. Indeed, one could say that the weakening of masculine potency can be attributed to the castrating impact of the war and the sudden and unexpected rise of women. As a result, men felt anxious and defensive about their masculinity, and the stable gender relations are destabilized. Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (Rihlat Gandhi Al-Saghir) and Al-Shayk's *The Story of Zahra* (Hikayat Zahra) - two novels written during the war- underline the fact that boasting of success in the war, on the one hand, and of sexual potency on the other, reveal that the two are interrelated. Men are hunters (they wield phallic guns) while women are the captured animals.

Accordingly, since man's reality after the civil war has been essentially ugly, frustrating, and disappointing at all levels (the personal, economic, political, and religious) any one who wants to translate this reality into adequate literary form can no longer do this through the traditional, socially acceptable manner. It involves breaking taboos and telling the whole truth whatever the taboos in the readers' minds. Indeed, the issue of sexuality remains inextricably bound up with political and religious issues so that it is difficult to separate one from the other. In other words, when writers write about sexuality, they are in effect writing about religion and politics indirectly. The increasing shift towards individualism makes individual plea-

sure the "sole yardstick of sexual ethics."⁷ In this manner, the male writer undermines the solidity of relations of domination and subordination not only at the personal level but also at the religious and political levels. Accordingly, sexual desire points to internal as well as external, private as well as public phenomena in such a manner that it becomes inevitably trapped within a system of oppression and liberation. Indeed, the notion that death haunts sexual desire is so pervasive throughout many areas of 20th century cultural production that some critics have gone so far as to insist that certain desires, especially male ones, are in themselves murderous. Referring to the protagonist of al-Daif's *Forget the Car*, Al-'Aweet compares the narrator's sexual promiscuity to an act of murder. He asserts that this ruthless objectification of the human body told by the author with equanimity, self-possession and detachment "reminds us of the deeds of professional killers who commit their murders, and then wipe their mouths with the sleeves of their shirts and move on as if nothing had happened."⁸ . These authors tell their stories in cold blood to challenge the institutions that have forged the manacles that have chained the individual and deprived him of personal, religious and political freedom.

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