

Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?

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The subject of female homosexuality in the Arab intellectual tradition has always been one of absence or dismissal. This can be attributed to the fact that female sexuality is mostly seen as primarily heterosexual in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Consequently, erotic relations among women are devalued as a temporary substitute for the love of men, and are considered of no real threat to the dominant heterosexual system as long as they remain undercover, or in the closet. Because homoerotic desire “defies social norms, breaks patterns and expectations for relationships” (Hart 69), homosexuality is a taboo subject that is rarely dealt with in Arabic literature. Hence, my main interest in this paper is to examine the grass roots of the lesbian identity in feminist discourse, and to relate the representations of lesbians in some interdisciplinary publications in lesbian studies to two recent Arabic novels: Misk Al-Ghazal (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, 1986) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, and *Ana, Hiya, Anti* (I am You, 2000) by Elham Mansour.

In Western discourse in general, and the feminist one in particular, the lesbian identity is perceived as the outcome of what is termed as “radical feminism”. This assumption denies the essence of the lesbian identity,

which existed ever since the dawn of history, and before the emergence of the feminist movement in the twentieth century. As a reaction against men, feminists have incorporated the term ‘separatist’ and ‘radical’ feminism as a means of exposing their revolt against the authority of men and the patriarchal system, which is exclusively heterosexual. This feminist tendency, which is sometimes perceived as lesbian, has nothing to do with lesbianism as an innate attraction towards women. In most feminist writings, lesbianism is still understood as a political reaction against the love of men. Amid feminist discussions around sex as power, there emerged an assertion of lesbianism as a political choice, a means of escaping relationships as decided and controlled by men. It remained the case that it was the lesbian separatist, wanting as little as possible to do with men, who set the pace.

With the exposure of Arab culture to Western cultures over the media, and pornography sites over the internet, lesbianism started to be more and more associated in the minds of the Arab viewers with heterosexuality in which the penis is replaced by a dildo. As Teresa de Lauretis asserts, “public forms of fantasy” regarding women’s desire for women are unavailable and sup-



Elsie Hakim. *Thalia et son besoin d'être* 1977

pressed, and “Western cultures” hegemonically represent “lesbianism as phallic pretension or male identification.” (de Lauretis 75, 308). Thus, the heterosexual male model is put at the center of any representation of a female homoerotic relation. The clitoris is totally absent in any discourse about women in general, and about lesbians in particular, for two main reasons: ignorance of its existence, and the predominance of the heterosexual ideology that thinks in vaginal terms. Freud’s notion that clitoral eroticism is immature and that vaginal orgasm through penetration is ‘mature and

natural’ holds sway twenty years after the woman’s movement began. The result is that both heterosexual men and women come to regard the penis as the ‘organ of pleasure’ and to generalize this perception to include all homosexuals who are portrayed as playing roles that correspond to men being active and to women being passive.

Consequently, lesbians are stereotyped as butch, playing the role of men, and femmes playing the role of women; a classification rejected by Elham Mansour’s lesbian Seham, who finds herself abused as a butch whose main role is to please women, without getting the love that she aspires to- a pure lesbian love that is void of the heterosexual meanings inscribed on her body. Therefore, she rejects the butch role where she is seen as a means of fulfilling the desires of heterosexual women for “(fuck)”, while not getting the true lesbian love and pleasure that she aspires to. (166). It is as Judith Butler argues, the figure of the butch/femme that exposes the naturalness of heterosexuality as a heterosexist presumption (Butler, 1990). Hence, in order for the lesbian identity to exist, there is a need to free lesbianism of both the heterosexual assumptions and the feminist ones that politicize butch/femme lesbian relationships. In fact, the feminist discourse that turns lesbianism

into a political choice is not liberating. Instead, it puts lesbians in a troublesome position where they have to play a major role in fulfilling the desires and fantasies of some heterosexual feminists at the expense of their true lesbian desires.

Because the dominant language in a heterosexual culture is “a heteropatriarchal language” as Celia Kitzinger refers to it (Mohin, 34), words such as “clitoris” are worthless, because they don’t bring any sort of pleasure to the typical heterosexual male whose

main interest is in achieving a vaginal penetration in order to assert his masculinity. Thus, it is the penis-vagina difference that establishes the heteropatriarchal desire. This heterosexual difference is put at the center of any discourse on lesbianism, which becomes an imitation of a typical heterosexual 'norm'. Physical difference is made to be erotic, so "natural desire" is seen as directed towards an "erotic complement"; i.e., a vaginal gap aspiring to be filled by a penis (Hart, 70). According to Nett Hart, "Heteropatriarchy eroticizes difference. It creates others, then makes these others the object of our "desire" ... Difference is made to be erotic so "natural desire" is for an erotic complement." (Hart, 70)

In the Arab world, however, the lesbian identity doesn't seem to exist, not because there are no lesbians, but because practices, which might be termed as lesbian in Western culture are left nameless in the Arab culture. Taking into consideration that the word 'lesbian' is rarely used in Arabic, and once used, it is charged with negative connotations, most lesbians avoid any public assertion of their identities. Besides, it is quite easy for Arab lesbians to deprive their emotional and physical intimacies of their lesbian connotations, because it is common in a conservative Arab culture that advocates separation between the sexes to find intimate relations among members of the same sex, without having to call such relations homosexual. Therefore, homosexuals can really manage to go with the mainstream, unless they decide to openly state their homosexual tendencies. Nevertheless, a lesbian identity becomes impossible under a separatist culture in which gestures of love among members of the same sex are tolerated, whatever their implicit connotations might be to the Western observer. Thus, it is Arab female homosociality that facilitates female homoeroticism.

Since sexuality is integral to most analyses of lesbianism, there is an essential need to look at the ways in which lesbian sexuality is portrayed in the novel. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, the contemporary lesbian fiction must be written by a self-declared lesbian, because "the nature of the lesbian makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it" (Professions of Desire 52). Hence, the lesbian novel "places love between women, including sexual passion at the center of its story". On the basis of such a definition, the lesbian novel does not seem to exist in Arabic fiction, except - to a certain extent - in the case of Elham Mansour's *I am You* in which the main focus of the novelist is a lesbian woman who faces a lot of problems in her attempts to assert her identity in a heterosexual society. Though Mansour adopts an autobiographical tone in her narration of the events, she manages to detach herself from that of her lesbian protagonist, Seham. In other words,

the reader can easily distinguish between the lesbian identity of Seham and the identity of the narrator who tries to remain detached. In this context, one could say that the writer/narrator cannot be regarded as a self-declared lesbian.

What adds to the ambivalent position in which the lesbian identity is put is that it is almost always portrayed from a male-oriented perspective, even by female writers who sometimes tend to assert the heterosexual perspective by giving a distorted picture of lesbianism which is portrayed as a means to an end as in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. The work can be construed as another misrepresentation of lesbians in homophobic cultures. Though in conservative and separatist cultures, same-sex relations are more tolerated than heterosexual ones, Al-Shaykh adopts the homophobic Western ideology, and tries to defend her privileged character against the charge of lesbianism. In other words, she seems to be aware of the way in which the word has been used as a slur. Although she does not condemn lesbianism, her attitude towards the lesbian affair between the Saudi Nour and the Lebanese Suha entertains the possibility that the writer is homophobic. Her novel asserts the stigma historically attached to lesbianism, which is associated with negative and undesirable attitudes, especially for a Westernized woman to whom the sight of two women dancing together is regarded as 'weird' and 'unnatural', and her thrill at being kissed by a woman, is immediately followed by a feeling of guilt, sickness and disgust. Hence, the writer forces the lesbian affair to abide by the heterosexual ideology that celebrates the kind of love that is based on biological difference.

In other words, Al-Shaykh's novel tends to assert the male-oriented perspective that regards lesbianism as an outcome of a conservative social structure that forbids women any access to men. Hence, lesbian relations are regarded as not chosen out of an innate tendency, but as imposed on women because of the absence of men, or the incapacity of some men to fulfill the sexual desires of women. In both cases, lesbianism is undervalued as a mere substitute for the love of men, that can be eliminated once women find suitable male partners, and once men learn how to please women. Such a perception disregards the fact that lesbianism is, for some women, a desired end and a true expression of their innermost feelings and bodily desires, that have nothing to do with either the absence or presence of men.

By giving a distorted picture of lesbianism, the novelist asserts the heterosexual perspective that contributes to the misrepresentation of lesbians in most cultures. The silencing of the lesbian discourse in Al-Shaykh's novel appears as an attempt on the part of the novelist

to assert the accepted social values that require women to make love to men, but not to women. These values tolerate lesbian relations only in the absence of men. This creates a dilemma for the lesbian character in Mansour's *I am You* who feels abused and exploited by women who use her desire for intimacy as a means of satisfying their unfulfilled sexual desires, but who abandon her once their desires are met. For instance, when she expresses her wish for a true lesbian love, she remembers herself spending "seven or eight hours in bed with a crazy woman ... and when I decided to sleep in her bosom, as a child, to hide in her breast, she accused me of not being fit for hugging"(166).

In other words, the lesbian is deprived of the chance to enjoy the kind of safety and protection that a same-sex relationship offers, a relationship in which the self and the other are one and the same.

The importance of Elham Mansour's novel is that it brings to light the difference between lesbian desire that stems from the body and the one that stems from feminist politics. The former is seen as authentic, natural, and forthright as in the relationship between the child and the mother; it belongs to the realm of the semiotic as it needs no language to express itself other than the body language. For Mansour's protagonist, the first discovery of lesbian sensations is experienced during childhood, first by the mother's touches and then by the hugs and caresses of her female schoolteacher. Nevertheless, her lesbian love surpasses that of the mother-daughter relationship. Mansour's lesbian is described as a male-brained individual, who rejects traditional femininity, and is referred to as "garcón manque". When she first had her menstrual cycle, it was a bitter mourning day for her" (Mansour 11). Though her mother tried to explain to her that she is now a woman and this is natural for all girls, Seham rejected this fact, and began to express her dislike of any kind of a female dress. She was always dressed in shirt and pants and was more comfortable in masculine shoes. Hence, cross-dressing is seen as a means of transcending her female identity and an expression of her lesbian sexuality. For her, dressing is the obvious compromise, if she cannot express her lesbian desire for a woman as the man does. At least she can be transsexual in terms of the clothes she insists on wearing.

In Mansour's novel, there is harmony between the gender dressing rules and one's gender identity that matches one's sexual orientation. Hence, the problem of self-representation for the lesbian is seen at its best in the character of Seham who is portrayed as a "true invert" whose attraction towards women has nothing to do with men who do not seem to be desired objects to her. She tells us: "I was never attracted to males"(75). Her main attraction was to the female

body: its femininity, softness and warmth. (37). The female is the only one, who can stimulate her whole being, and all her feelings and sensations (76). Despite the emphasis on dress codes, lesbian sexuality remains a sort of sexual, emotional and physical attraction towards women - an attraction that has more to do with one's "genes", as Doctor Layal asserts. (76).

In the case of Al-Shaykh's novel, lesbianism is seen as a novel experience that can be enjoyed as a substitute for unfulfilled heterosexual desires. Hence, the lesbian body becomes politicized in the sense that it can oscillate between the heterosexual position and the homosexual, depending on the woman's choice, and situation. In this novel, lesbianism is used as a means of revolting against the heterosexual system in which heterosexual women finding themselves incapable of subduing men, turn towards women in the harem. In other words, lesbians become sexual objects used to satisfy the desires of heterosexual women who exploit them either in the name of 'bisexuality', or 'radical feminism'.

The lesbian identity in the Arab world is still perceived from behind walls and mirrors that do not reflect the true essence of lesbian sexuality. Nevertheless, closets have opened to the Arab readers who have long been denied the right of approaching such taboo issues. In Elham Mansour's novel: *I am You*, the Lebanese writer crosses the barriers that have surrounded female sexuality for centuries. Unlike Mansour, Al-Shaykh makes all women potential lesbians. The title of Mansour's novel, brings to mind the words of the French feminist Luce Irigaray: "Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once." (Irigaray 1985: 209).

The earlier manner of perceiving women does not help the lesbian identity; instead it undermines any possibility of a legitimate existence. If all women can be lesbians, they can also become heterosexuals, and this essentialist thinking works in favor of the dominant heterosexual ideology.

It seems important to reinvent the 'lesbian identity' that is distorted by feminist misconceptions. By turning lesbianism into a political choice, feminists have neglected the ever-existing lesbian identity, which has more to do with body politics than with feminist politics. If lesbianism is a political choice for feminists, heterosexuality itself can be a possible alternative for lesbians, which contradicts with the true lesbian identity. By choosing lesbianism as a political choice, some feminists will end up denying their innate heterosexual identity just to prove a point and adopt a particular sex-

ual politics. In this regard, one can be accused of essentialism; that is essentializing heterosexual women as merely heterosexual, with no other desires or tendencies. Since lesbianism existed before the emergence of feminism, one can distinguish between two lesbian identities: the one whose lesbian body is a biological destiny, and the other whose choice is an expression of one's feminist politics. The third mysterious identity that is still locked within the two is a combination of body politics and gender politics: a sort of a transsexual and a transgendered lesbian.

Seen in the above light, one should not only distinguish between lesbians whose sexual attraction towards women is inborn, and the cultural lesbians whose lesbianism is a political choice, but one should realize the necessity of enabling inborn lesbians to choose to normalize their body politics, and their natural lesbianism. In feminist discourse, lesbian relations are interpreted within a heterosexual system where homosexuality is used as a means of threatening men, and showing them that women have their different ways of satisfying their sexual desires. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh* the feminist Suha insists that her first 'natural' attraction is towards men, and her discovery of lesbianism, despite its fun, was a temporary outlet. If feminism wins its battle against men in such a manner, lesbianism will surely lose its legitimacy, in the sense that there is no reason for its existence from a heterosexual perspective. Luckily, other feminist discourses have seen the lesbian body in a different manner and have enabled lesbians to reclaim the female body from the realm of abstraction to the representation of concrete bodies, bodies in the plural, bodies that speak different languages.

Nevertheless, a lesbian identity is still impossible under the current conditions where lesbian visibility remains a problem. Besides, the singularity of the lesbian identity as it exists nowadays suggests that there is something coherently shared by all lesbians, regardless of their different practices and desires. Of course, the problem of essentialism does not only contribute to the misrepresentation of female identity in general, but also lesbian identity in particular, taking into consideration the invisibility of lesbian lives, and the misrepresentation of lesbians in the Western media. The media makes assumptions about relationships between women such as the butch/femme relationship, or "the longstanding use of lesbians in male-directed pornography, both in magazines and in the cinema. Such stereotypes of the butch and femme are represented as excessively beautiful and stylish within the norms of the heterosexual judgments on such matters." (Mohin, 87)

Similarly, the lesbian identity does not seem to exist in Arab culture, and even when it does in some novels, it is either treated as a pathological case that reflects the

incapacity of the male to please the female, or as a result of the separation between the sexes in some conservative Arab cultures. In such a manner, even Mansour's novel that best reflects the fantasies of a true lesbian might be interpreted by some male-oriented readers as an educational lesson meant to explain to men how to please women sexually. Hence, man is set at the center of any lesbian discourse, either as a reader who has to learn, or as an absent character whose absence is seen as the cause of such behavior. In both cases, lesbians are denied the right to exist in a manner that appeals to them, and to express their innate desires that spring from their bodies, not from male expectations or social assumptions. Despite recent attempts by some female Arab novelists to bring lesbian lives and practices into light, there is still a dire need to shed a more positive light on lesbian love; a light that does not reinvent the heterosexual matrix in all its illusions and delusions. The issue at stake is the creation of a body politics and a new lifestyle that springs from such an understanding of lesbian sexuality, let alone bringing forth a new way of perceiving the dominant norms, laws and regulations.

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