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**Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*: Has Queerness Always Been Queer?**

When did sexuality and gender become such controversial matters? Have we always condemned anything that didn't meet the heteronormative standard? Is heterosexuality truly the only normal and natural expression of sexuality and has it always been this way? Sexuality and gender identity are multifaceted topics that have been reconstructed throughout history. Legacies of oppression, imperialism, and colonialism have left their mark on relations of power that are embedded into society. The European imperialist patriarchy altered the global queer landscape and produced and maintained many of the gender norms we see today. This essay will delve into pre-modern versus contemporary representations of sexuality in Arabic fiction and their transformation; it will analyze how imperialism and colonialism transformed the representation and expression of gender and sexuality in Arabic fiction, specifically in *The Stone of Laughter* (1990) by Lebanese author, Hoda Barakat.

Aspects of culture are intertwined as they rely on one another to properly function and hold power. Empire and colonization modified what societies and cultures deemed as normal. The thought processes and cultural practices surrounding queer spaces and behavior throughout the Arab world were very different prior to empire and colonialism. In "Desire under conflict: The potential for queer in Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*," Feras Alkabani

sheds light on pre-modern Arabic literature's celebratory depiction of homoerotic desire

vis-a-vis the dearth and negative connotations of the theme in modern Arabic fiction. The article explores Barakat's implementation of surrealism in her portrayal of Khalil's sexuality and the reality of his choices within the context of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90). Khalil's queer identity, which marks his dissidence, becomes a form of resistance that challenges the status quo of his hetero-patriarchal society and the unresolved sociopolitical issues that led to the War (1).

The Western-constructed binary was brought into their imperial and colonial states-- whether they be Arab, East Asian, Southwest Asian, or even in the Americas with indigeneity. These binaries were established and imposed onto these colonized spaces—resulting in fragmentation that merges religion, politics, social values/norms, and cultural practices. Barakat's novel gives us a raw and authentic look into a young man named Khalil living in a city under fire and consumed by civil war. We get insight into Khalil's sexuality and how it bleeds into every strand of his life. His reality is influenced by his resistance in dealing with and battling the rooted structures of oppression. His identity is bound to pressing sociopolitical matters that led up to the War he is victim to. The novel depicts the oppressed, queer experience during a time of war and how Khalil's psychosexual struggles intertwine into Lebanon's wider conflict.

Gender is central to sexuality, race, & class—and they all interact in the wider socio-cultural context. The reading of this work provides a rich, enlightening learning experience for its readers as it redefines and challenges conventions of queerness. Barakat explores matters of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexuality—demonstrating how aspects of identity interweave to create the distinct experiences of these individuals. The text especially confronts themes of sexuality and gender as it exhibits performed versions of masculinity and how these ideals create expectations of what it means to be a man. The novel recognizes the fluidity of sexuality and

how that fluidity clashes with societal norms.

Khalil's rejection of self is revealed through his thought processes and the actions he carries out as he struggles to fit into the normative, hetero-patriarchal space. We see him cope with his androgyny and how it impacts his thinking and approach to the world. He only knows how to describe himself through feminine traits and avoids dealing with this characteristic of his identity by mocking women; his envious remarks towards them are a reflection of how he feels about himself. He asserts power and dominance onto women to uplift his masculinity—projecting his insecurities in an attempt to conform to masculinity as it stands and by resenting femininity. The novel shows the process in which Khalil's inability to pursue his love for Youssef develops his misogynistic tendencies. Feras Alkabani notes that "Khalil's misogynistic dehumanization of Zahra is indicative of his gradual integration into the hetero-patriarchal system as he starts mixing with politics," and his thirst to conform to heteronormative masculinity and the physical and psychological changes that accompany the process is a theme that is present throughout the text (361). He tries to categorize his own gender and sexuality yet fails to see the fluidity of sexuality. Khalil declares he is "a wife of the wrong-sex," which only nurtures his feelings of displacement and alienation (Barakat 115). He craves stability and balance as he deals with surrounding expectations and his intense feeling of isolation. This shows the obstacles he faces regarding his identity and how he grapples with internalized homophobia that fosters his self-denial.

Barakat illustrates the restrictions of "manhood" that Khalil feels trapped by and conveys the confinement he feels from these standards of masculinity. The two forms of masculinity that Khalil recognizes center on and are predicated on violence and on the ability and willingness to commit violence. His lack of personal identity and alienation from society stem from his

rejection of his sexuality, as “[t]he doors of both kinds of manhood were closed to Khalil and he remained, alone in his narrow passing place, in a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life, just within reach of two very attractive versions of masculinity, the force that makes the volcano of life explode” (Barakat 12). Ultimately, Khalil’s denial and rejection of self becomes so unbearable that he convinces himself that everything about him is perverse. He internalizes the various ways sexuality has been categorized throughout his life, blaming himself and feeling responsible for the death of the man he loves: “I’m the one who killed him. I’ll make my confession like a big watermelon. I’ll eat his death, morsel by morsel, until the water-melon is finished” (Barakat 134). His homosexuality is such a pervasion in his head that he links his homosexual desires to Youssef’s death. Khalil has a difficult time seeing his life as anything other than a symptom of his wrongdoings and circumstances and he convinces himself that his homosexuality stems from the social deterioration and chaos of a nation infested with civil war. He uses the havoc around him to justify why he feels the way he does in regards to his sexuality. And after the death of his loves, he spirals and furthers his isolation. He embraces a newfound identity, bottling up his pain and channeling it into something negative and inauthentic to himself. He becomes a warlord who partakes in violence and dominance to assert power and masculinity—resenting and rejecting femininity to uplift his masculinity. He casts aside his gender and sexuality as he takes on the pressure to conform, forcing himself to abandon his sexuality and refusing to see it as a facet of his identity. Khalil seizes power to fuel his embrace of toxic masculinity—from bashing women to committing horrific acts of violence against them, and even renting out Madame Isabelle’s home to store weapons. His alienation and rejection of self become so disarrayed that he embraces the expectations of violent manhood. He gets to a point in his battle with masculinity where he feels he has no other option but to comply, and the

narrator admits that “Khalil is gone” (Barakat 219). The novel supports Nicole Fares’s claim that Arab LGBTQ individuals “embody what is considered to be an oxymoron: Being Arab and queer, being a lesbian and wearing a hijab, being in between worlds and not belonging anywhere” (Fares 2018). We see his complicated participation in the broad discourse of masculinity as he struggles to navigate a world in which he feels he has no place.

Legacies of postcolonial failures reveal themselves in the novel and society demonstrating how modern portrayals of male homosexuality “draw on power dialectics of master/slave, active/passive and local/colonial, and as such reflect a sense of overall powerlessness, inferiority and alienation from the political process, while underscoring the Arab male’s loss of manhood and of self” (Al-Samman, 2008, 270). Representations of gender and sexuality in Arabic literature have drastically transformed from the pre-modern to the contemporary period. Representations of gender and sexuality in Arabic fiction went from depicting homoerotic desire in a commemorative way to hardly being recognized at all—and when addressed, only promote derogatory connotations. Barakat’s novel resists the post-colonial norm; “[r]ather than casting homosexuality as a sign of moral decay, the text turns that cliché on its head by shifting the blame on to society’s irrational problematization of sexual otherness, linking it to wider unresolved sociopolitical issues, many of which are caused and sustained by overarching hetero-patriarchal power structures” (Alkabani 353). The novel has a central focus surrounding Khalil’s struggle to navigate the sectarian violence that derives from fractures created by empire and colonization.

Queerness used to be celebrated and was seen as normal to partake in—it was not categorized as an aspect of identity, but rather as something people simply did. “Contrary to the liberal, permissive attitude of pre-modern Arab culture that acknowledged the fluidity of desire

and sanctioned its artistic celebration in literature, modern literary depictions of homosexuality have been far less common and often problematic” (Al-Samman 2008, 270–271). It is important to note that “[l]iterary portrayals of same-sex love continued across the centuries and enjoyed popularity among Arab literati, religious imams and high-ranking officials” (Alkabani 352). Joseph Massad also makes the argument that “homosexuality, and its constitutive identity categories of queer, gay, or lesbian, is a Western conception that defines the Western sexual subject and should not be universalized to represent the sexualities of Arabs” (234). Systems of empire and colonization work across the region, and in *The Stone of Laughter*, the repercussions of these systems reveal themselves through a fractured state engulfed by civil war. It is crucial to recognize that postcolonial states face conflicts like civil war as a consequence of the neocolonial political structures that took over after the end of empire. Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic* that all sexualities have been altered by colonialism in some way, and as a result are arranged between the East and West (Gilroy 1993). Imperial and colonial structures played a major role in creating the Western binary that tends to the isolation of queerness in the Middle East as “gays and lesbians are produced and named where they do not exist” (Georgis 235). The Lebanese civil war—like many civil wars that occurred after the end of empire—was an extension of the political issues empire generated, such as ethnic and religious fragmentation and class-based social organization.

Queer and postcolonial theories help us to understand how colonial legacies have left their mark. Robert Aldrich argues in *Historical Views of Homosexuality: European Colonialism*, that the conquest of overseas territories by European and with other expanding powers resulted in the imposition of Western law codes which regulated sexuality—including same-sex relations, gender norms, and marriage. This infiltration of policy has taught and nurtured homophobia and

inevitably interconnected with power and domination. “There are very limited historical and literary sources on nonhetero sexualities in the Middle East” (Georgis 234). Despite this lack of representation, pre-modern Arabic literature embraced and celebrated queerness, making it necessary to acknowledge the notion of heteronormativity and how it perpetuates into how we understand gender and sexuality.

The modern-day struggle for queer acceptance and representation is rooted in the ongoing imperial and colonial structures that unavoidably affect and intertwine with all aspects of society and culture. The reconstruction of gender and sexuality portrayals from the pre-modern to contemporary eras is rooted in problematic structures of the imperialist patriarchy. In evaluating pre-modern representations of sexuality, it can be observed how empire and colonization transformed the queer global landscape. In *The Stone of Laughter*, Hoda Barakat demonstrates and challenges the status-quo of queer representation that has origins in imperial and colonial ideologies.

## Works Cited

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