



THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN ARABIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF HANAN AL-SHAYKH'S *I SWEEP THE SUN OFF ROOFTOPS*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to cast light on the important modifications in the Arab way of thinking and how some Arab writers came to view the West in their writings. Hanan Al-Shaykh is an Arab writer who views the West in a way that is completely different from that of her precedent Arab writers. Arabs' view of the West was characterized by a state of fascination with everything that came from the West. Arabs were and are still admirers of the development in the spheres of the Western world technological, politically, economically, and even socially. Like many contemporary Arab writers, Al-Shaykh is extremely concerned with women's rights, comparing the living conditions of Western women with the poor and backward conditions of Eastern women. Unlike the Arab writers of the postcolonial period who represent the East as man with the motivation to take revenge of the Western colonizers by having sexual encounter with a Western woman, Hanan Al-Shaykh in her short story *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*, as in most of her writings, creates her Arab female protagonist characters not with the notion of revenge and hostility but to seek freedom with the assistance of the Western man. Therefore, this paper attempts to shed light on the difference between the representations of the Western other in al-Shaykh's writings and that of her precedent Arab writers. It attempts to answer some questions such as: what topics were presented regarding the West in some Arabic fiction in general and in Al-Shaykh's short story under scrutiny in particular? How does Al-Shaykh imagine the West through her depiction of the Westerners? Was there a balance in the depiction of the West's good and bad characteristics? Did she present the Eastern characters as equivalent, superior, or inferior to the Westerners? Where does this feeling of equality, superiority, or inferiority spring from? Do the Eastern characters accept/reject the other's values as a way of life? Why do they accept/reject them? Are her representation of the Westerners/ Easterners realistic or fictitious? Was Al-Shaykh successful in her representation of the East-West relationship through her characters?*

MANSOUR JARALLAH AHMED SARHAN

1Page



Before answering these questions, this paper aims to have a seedy glance at a few Arab popular works and how a few Arab postcolonial novelists expressed their views of the Westerners in their fictions.

INTRODUCTION

Man is unable to live in isolation from others of his kind. During the process of interaction, man forms an idea or a belief about others, as others would form an idea or a belief about him. Thus each group or community of people would have their own deeply-held perspectives and ideas about other separate groups and communities. A population's idea about other populations may be realistic to a certain extent and based on actual facts, or it may be pure fiction and contrary to actual reality. It is only in the nineteenth century, when those studying culture began to compare different cultures with one another and noticed the fluidity of thoughts and customs between them. It is through this interface between separate cultures that the process of 'affecting and being affected' can be seen.

Like everyone, I have formed ideas and images about other people, groups or populations. The West, or the Westerner, is one of the people of whom I have formed an image since childhood as a result of what I have heard and seen in school, in the mosque and in the media, and as such, the matter of 'the Westerner's image in Arabic fiction began to occupy my mind. That is why, this paper is devoted to present how a female Arab writer, Hanan Al-Shaykh represents the Westerners in her short story entitled *Aknus al-Shams aan al-Sutuh* (I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops), included in the eponymous collection, published in Arabic in 1994, and translated into English by Catherine Cobham under the same title in 1998. So, in what follows, I will refer to the text as *I Sweep*.

In this paper, I attempt to have a glance at the significant changes in Arab thought and how some Arab intellectuals came to view the West in their writings. Hanan Al-Shaykh is an Arab writer who views the West in a way that is completely different from that of her precedent Arab writers. Arabs' view of the West was marked with a state of fascination with everything that came from the West; technological inventions, political and economic systems, and even social conditions.

Like many Arab writers, Al-Shaykh is extremely concerned with women's rights, comparing the living conditions of Western women with the poor and backward conditions of Eastern women. Therefore, there are many questions this paper attempts to answer, such as: what topics were presented regarding the West in some Arabic fiction in general and in Al-Shaykh's short story under scrutiny in particular? How did she imagine the West through her depiction of the Westerners? Was there a balance in the depiction of the West's good and bad



characteristics? Did she represent the Easterner characters as equivalent, superior, or inferior to the Westerners? Where does this feeling of equality, superiority, or inferiority spring from? Do the Easterner characters accept the other's values as a way of life? If yes, why do they accept them? What do they lack in their homelands? Are her representation of the Westerners/ Easterners realistic or fictitious? Was Al-Shaykh successful in her representation of the East- West relationship through her characters?

Before we proceed to answer these questions and analyse Al-Shaykh's view of the West in her writing and in the novella under discussion, let's have an overview of how some Arab writers view the West. The Arab novelists presented their image of the Westerners in different forms, changing between good and bad. The Westerner is the role model whose civilisation should be imitated in finance, industry, and culture on the one hand, yet on the other hand, he is the strong materialistic person, lacking in compassion and mercy towards those who are weaker than he is; the one who wants everything for himself and seeks to further his interests by all means.

Arab writers' view of the West differs from time to another. Some believe that the West is a world of development. They are of the view that the Muslim world should learn from the West in order to edify the cultural and social ills of the East. Some nineteenth century writers like Rifa Rafi Al-Tahtawi believed that "the solution for social and cultural ills lay in introducing reform, advocating women's education and the parliamentary system in the Arab world. (qtd. in Al-Malik 56). Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq associated Western superiority over the Arab world with Western planning and management, saying: "where European has taken lead over us in this age is in manufacturing and trade because of their organisation and methodical ways" (qtd. Tarabulsi in 176-178).

Dan Vasii in his article "Are Western Culture and Values Superior" is of the view that culturally there cannot be a ranking - all cultures are specific to their respective populations, Chinese, Muslim cultures are in no way inferior to the West. Only regarding science and technology, Western culture may be considered superior. No matter how many advances were made by the other cultures, the modern science is a Western creation.

Writers of early decades of the 20th century, believed that deemed the West to be a symbol of science and freedom, and even as a space to vent repressed sexuality. However, they were aware that it was an ideologically and religiously different space from the spiritual East. In other words, they saw values in both worlds and tried to strike a balance between the two. This approach was clearly adopted by many Arab novelists, namely Taha Hussein in his *Adib* (A Man of Letters) (1994), Tawfiq Al-Hakim in his *Aṣfur min al-sharq* (A Sparrow from the



East)(1938), Suhayl Idris' *Al-Hayy al-Latini* (The Latin Quarter) (2006) and Tayib Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shimal* (Season of Migration to the North) (1969).

In *A Man of Letters*, Taḥa Hussein portrayed the cultural encounter between the East and the West as a conflict between the world of repression and the world of freedom. He juxtaposed Western progress with Eastern decadence. However, Hussein suddenly portrayed France as a tempting land of pleasure and vice that could drive man away from the right course of life. Thus, the protagonist fell a victim and was swept away by the misleading pleasures of the West (sex and alcohol). Consequently, Hussein represents his protagonist as a loser and highlighted that the protagonist failed in his studies because he could not maintain the delicate balance between his Eastern identity and the Western knowledge and worldly pleasures surrounding him. Likewise, Tawfiq al-Hakim in his novel *A Sparrow from the East* demonstrated the contrasting images of the underdeveloped East and the advanced West. Unlike the East that stood for pure idealism and spiritual values, Al-Hakim associated the West with sterile materialism and moral decadence. After showing the developments of the protagonist, the writer concluded that the East could be the spiritual solution to the pragmatic West. In Suhayl Idris' *The Latin Quarter*, the Lebanese protagonist falls in love with a French woman while studying in Paris. The relationship with the Western woman initiated a conflict for the protagonist, as he had to choose between his social duty towards his family and country, and his own desire. The end also underlines the growing cultural differences that put an end to any possible convergence between people from these two worlds. Tayib Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*, shaped the encounter between the Arab and the West in the context of revenge and decolonization where there was antagonism between the North and the South. The "desire (of the Arab world) for the north (West) becomes the desire for the European woman", as Mike Velez remarked. Salih conceptualized the novel through the protagonist Mustafa Sa'id, a Sudanese man who left his colonized country, for the country who was colonizing it. He went to England following the First World War and returned to his native country following its independence in the fifties. Salih reduced the narrative to anti-colonial retribution through a string of encounters between the protagonist and a number of English women. The sexual engagement with Western women became the protagonist's prime objective in order to settle accounts with the colonizer, who had dominated Sudan (the writer and protagonist's home) for a long time, usurping its resources and enslaving its people. "The Arab world symbolised itself as male and the West as female. This gendered treatment of the West reflected a new mode of Arab thinking where the West was an equivalent, not a master, and at the same time an integral piece within the equation of Eastern spirituality and Western materialism" (Shawkat 208- 209).

Unlike the writers of the postcolonial period who represent the East as man with the motivation to take revenge of the Western colonizers by having sexual encounter with a



Western woman, our writer Hanan Al-Shaykh creates her Arab female protagonist characters not with the notion of revenge and hostility but to seek freedom with the assistance of the Western man, and to narrow the gap between the two inconsistent cultures. Many Arabic works like the mentioned above are some of the many Arabic works written in the postcolonial period and which embody the Easterners' view and attitude towards the West. These writers produced their works in an era of postcolonialism that is why, they create their protagonists with the idea of hostility. The protagonists in these works are Arab men who have sexual affairs with Western women. By this, they embody the idea of the colonized taking revenge of the colonizer. Rasheed El-Enany in his book *Arab Representations of the Occident* observes that writers like these have developed a "very rational and appreciative" view towards the Western 'other'. To them, the Western becomes both "an object of love and hate, a shelter and a threat, a usurper and a giver, an enemy to be feared and a friend whose help is to be sought"(2). Al-Shaykh has maintained this idea in an interview: "I'm from a younger generation. For those [aforesaid] writers the West is always foreign women their heroes desire and on whom they want to wreak revenge for colonialism" (qtd. in Jaggi). Indeed, Al-Shaykh explores the relationship between East and West through a sexual encounter, but she goes against the grain of tradition established by earlier male authors. The East in her work is represented by a woman and the West by a man. The implication of this role reversal has not been fully explored by Al-Shaykh's critics. In refusing to fall into the trap of reverse sexism, the equation of the colonizer with the feminine and the colonized with the masculine, a gesture that leaves the power relation between the sexes intact, the author reveals her progressive stance vis-à-vis man-woman relation.

Al-Shaykh's characters are flesh and blood people. Through their physical acts, she tries to portray a portrait that attempts to see the *other* not as such, but as ultimately similar, as ultimately not unlike the self, as a companion not an antagonist. As she herself puts it, "it pleases me to think that I [am contributing] to the removal of misunderstanding between East and West if only by as much as an iota" (qtd. in El-Enany 200). In so doing, Al-Shaykh belongs to her age as her predecessors belonged to theirs. Arab writers like Hussein, Ideris, Salih, Al-Hakim, and others wrote under or in the aftermath of colonialism when the European 'other' was the opponent of the 'self' in its struggle for independence. By contrast, Al-Shaykh writes in the age of Arab defeatism when Arab societies and their ruling regimes have failed in achieving liberty and dignity for their citizens in the post-independence era. She writes in the age of the Arab diaspora in the West in search of opportunity and freedom. Europe had become a refuge place and a protector, rather than a coercive colonial power, and it is no wonder that we encounter in her work this reconciliatory approach to the theme.

Hanan Al-Shaykh in her short story *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*, recreates Arab expatriate life in London and presents the perception of the 'self' and the 'other' within a framework



that can be seen as characteristic of the way the Arab emigre in the West generally sees himself/herself in relation to the 'other', indeed in a way not unlike the collective Arab perception of the self in relation to the Western other. Al-Shaykh in this short story, "reflects her great sensitivity not only to human nature in its universal phenomena but also in the cultural imprints of society. A delicate line of comparison is drawn here between the East and the West" (Jayyusi 675-676). In spite of her advocacy of a global culture that is a modification of the Western culture, Al-Shaykh is not naïve and admirer of the Western culture. She hopefully writes to bring about some changes that help narrow the gap between the East and the West.

One of the most significant issues that has to be discussed here is in fact the setting of Al-Shaykh's short story *I Sweep the Sun*: London. Al-Shaykh's representation of London is not just as a geographical location, but a metonymic metaphor for a value. The protagonist perceives this value to be missing from the Arab geographical locations from which she came: a value called freedom. In the picture that Al-Shaykh paints, London gives, protagonist the freedom to do what she wants, to fulfil herself, to be emancipated from censorship, be it social, religious, or sexual. London liberates her from all of that. In London, the protagonist gets rid of the "threatening looks of the men in [her] family, the attentive stares from the ones in the street, [her] mother's harsh way of talking" (*I Sweep* 126-127). London grants her independence, self-esteem and confidence. She remarks:

I was happy in London, free, mistress of myself and my pocket. Here it was impossible not to be happy. At home I thought I was ugly. I listened to the English boy singing the praises of my dark coloring and frizzy hair, felt him kiss me on the cheek with obvious pleasure whenever I cooked a meal and when I came in from work, or when we sat watching television together, and found him waiting for me at the end of the road when for some reason I was late getting back. (127)

That London should have that value for protagonist is hardly surprising since admittedly it has held the same value for Hanan Al-Shaykh herself, who argues that it was London that made it possible for her to write her fiction, and that she might have not been able to write the way she did in Beirut:

"London eggs you on, it makes you feel you are living in a healthy atmosphere, free of repression . . . Because I live in London I have come to know myself as I really am... in London you come to know who you are; you shed off your outer shell and see yourself as if in front of a mirror" (qtd. in El-Enany 198).



Al-Shaykh personifies the city by representing the influence it has on people regardless of their backgrounds. In her interview with Christiane Schlote, she remarks:

I noticed that all the years I have been living in London, subconsciously, I have been thinking of the city [London] and how it has received and is still receiving immigrants. Whether they come because of poverty and economic reasons or because of political reasons. They are like a pot full of ingredients, full of reasons. Mainly, they either try to change their lives or continue in this country. But, inevitably, they really change, no matter how they are holding on to their traditions. [...] Ultimately, they change. The city makes them change.

Al-Shaykh here does not focus on the city as geographical space, but on the impact it has on its people. For the Arab protagonist of Al-Shaykh's *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*, city [London] means freedom. Economic relations structure the experiences of the Arab character in this story and set her migration in motion. When she reaches London, her life changes drastically, because of her feeling of protection and security. The protagonist is full of confidence because London grants her the freedom that she lacks in her Arab country (Morocco). In other words, coming to London from a life of poverty and abuse in a Moroccan village, our protagonist finds refuge, opportunity, independence, and freedom in London, all of which she had been deprived of as a poor and uneducated Arab woman in a repressive patriarchal society. In the text under discussion, the protagonist grew up neglected, poor, and dirty. She is the daughter of a very poor family. However, in London, this neglected poor girl has her own residence and income and becomes the source of income of her family. "The letter with my name [protagonist's] in English on the envelope, a Moroccan stamp, and a list of requests from my family for a white bridal veil for my sister, surgical stockings for my brother and a china dish for my mother" (*I Sweep* 109). This common feeling of all Al-Shaykh's characters living in London including our protagonist reminds one of a similar expression expressed by Al-Shaykh through one of her characters in her novel *Only in London*:

London was freedom. It was your right to do anything, anytime. You did not need to undergo a devastating war in order to be freed to do what you wanted, and when you did do what you wanted, you did not have to feel guilty or embarrassed, and start leading a double life and ultimately end up frustrated.
(149)



Hanan Al-Shaykh is one of those female Arab writers supporting the idea of a ‘universal culture’ which is a distinctive extension of Western culture, and seeks to combine Arab cultural values with core global values that promote social advancement and democracy. In all her works, her main concern is East-West’s relation. For Hanan, home/homeland and the feeling of belonging are not related to definite geographical places. Home can be found in multiple locations. Like Virginia Woolf, she feels that her “country is the whole world” (197). In her outlook, I would argue that home is the place which tolerates and promotes various perspectives, changing conventions, and cultural differences. Maya Jaggi in her article “Conflicts Unveiled” has cited Al-Shaykh as saying: “my life has been in stages: Beirut to Cairo to the Gulf to London. When you move from one place to another you recreate yourself; you become another person, no matter how strong you are.” For her, home is the country where you are ‘in’, not ‘of’. Despite the feelings of guilt enforced by their traditional backgrounds, like her characters, Al-Shaykh feels London to be her home. For them all (the writer as well as her characters), home is where there is a sense of “feeling at home” (Brah 4).

Despite all the disputes on identity, Al- Shaykh’s protagonist claims that the duplicity of the self-arises from the oppression of the community, the location where one is supposed to belong, but does not. The ‘host’ society becomes home in the perception of this character who radically redefines the notion of ‘home’ for herself. In the story, the protagonist regards London as home, a space where she can be part of the mainstream even though she is an expatriate, which is in line with what Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora*, calls “a psychic geography of space” where she is allowed the freedom of the country she is *in* but not *of* (4). She regards her transnational situatedness as a space where she can belong to her own Arab community, yet be her genuine self, and not forced into an authentic existence. Whether the protagonist can transform from her transnational space and become *of* England is doubtful.

Al-Shaykh wants to say that transnationality represented by London enables the protagonist to escape the traditional oppression in the Arab society and provides her with freedom. But is it ‘freedom’ in the true sense of the term? Likewise, the revolt against the oppressive patriarchy that involves lowering of one’s self-esteem strikes the reader as a questionable act. “Is it because he’s an Englishman that he doesn’t feel proud he’s taken my virginity... I tried to tell him that I didn’t blame him for deflowering me but he wasn’t listening” (*I Sweep* 111-112). This is how the Arab girl describes the situation when she surrenders herself to the English boy. One feels speechless to describe the degeneration that the Arab character undergoes in the Western society. In my view point, Al-Shaykh does not success in her fabrication of characters like the one discussed in this short story as real representative of the Arab society as a whole. This character seeks to take revenge against the oppression in her



home society through the act of lowering of self-esteem, namely adultery which is prohibited in almost all religions. I think a sober-minded writer like Al-Shaykh could manage to represent her criticism of the Arab society in a way that doesn't contradict with or violate religious values. For example, the text could gain more seriousness and success if the writer reflects the real reasons behind the Arabs' migration to the West such as the lack of work opportunities, economic hardship, civil wars in their home societies, the lack of health insurance, the lack of freedom of self-expression in a highly humanely manner, and so forth. However, in the text, the Arab protagonist comes to London in search of worldly and physical freedom. Such depiction of the Arab character, reminds one of her novel *Only in London* in which all her characters travel to London looking for adultery and homosexuality. Amira is a prostitute who sells her body to the highest bidder; Samir leaves his society and children to practice his homosexuality; and even Lamis is represented as unhappy with her Arab husband. Though her Arab husband provides her with luxurious life in London, she feels happy only after she meets Nicolas, the English man and lover. Al-Shaykh presents Lamis as unhappy in her martial life with her Iraqi husband, but happy with having illegal sex with the Englishman. Thus, I can say that Al-Shaykh presents a negative image of the Arab citizen and society at large.

Al-Shaykh portrays the eastern character as oppressed women seeking freedom with the help of the Western other. This feeling of inferiority that originates in her homeland; and the feeling of security that she enjoys in London makes the protagonist very eager to have a relationship with the English boy. After meeting the English boy, the protagonist is very thirsty to have an affair with him. She is presented as the slave who is ready to do whatever she could to please her English master/sexual partner. Another scene in which cultural inferiority and self-hatred is reflected is when the Arab protagonist remarks "I wanted their [English boys] approval, even if they did smell so terrible, the reek of their hair in its stiff, bright tufts mixing with the fumes of alcohol" (*I Sweep* 114).

This perception is characterised by a feeling of inferiority towards the other. It is a perception which typifies the other as the model to be emulated and the yardstick by which to judge both the achievements and failures of the self; a perception in which there is a latent desire to please the other, to win his approval of what the self does and to convince him that the self is doing what it can to rise to his level and to adopt both his intellectual principles and way of life (Loomba 23-24). This feeling of inferiority may be a vestige of the colonial days, but there is no doubting that it has survived on conscious as well as subliminal levels for more than half a century now into the postcolonial era. Hisham Sharabi in his *Introduction to Study the Arab Community*, maintains that although the Arab world has gained independence from Western imperialism, it continues nevertheless to be dominated by the West "on the psychological and cultural levels," that Arabs suffer from an inferiority complex in their



relationship with the West, that all their modes of thinking and behaviour in their daily life are drawn wholesale from the West, and that the Arab psyche, consciously or unconsciously, desires nothing more than the approval of the West (93-95). So it might be said that this feeling is a consequence of colonialism and we, the colonized people are defined as those, “in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (Fanon 26).

As a continuation of what I have explained above, on the story level, all the acts of self-denial confirm the Arab protagonist’s feeling of inferiority that is prevailing from the very initiation to the termination of the story. A translation of such feeling is expressed when Al-Shaykh’s emigrant protagonist in London expresses her wish to gain her English boyfriend’s approval: “I wanted his approval because he was English. I wanted the approval of everyone from the bus conductor to the Pakistani shopkeeper because he owned a shop and spoke English” (*I Sweep* 110-111). Another scene that shows the feeling of inferiority is when the protagonist has paid for an overcoat she bought at Marks and Spencer, she feels contented because the English cashier girl had smiled at her and commended her choice, which means that she “approved of my taste.” (113). The protagonist is happy for the good manner that the cashier girl deals with her as if she, as an Arab emigrant, does not deserve to be dealt with respectfully. That is why, she adds “I’d given her [cashier] the right amount of money for the red coat, which I still haven’t worn” (113). Again, when she enters a pub for the first time in her life with her English boyfriend and his mates, she is unable to say a word because of the loud din, and drinks only water as she does not drink alcohol, but mere standing there like the English made her feel proud, overjoyed, and filled with self-confidence: “Even though I didn’t say a word in the uproar and drank only water, I was standing there like them in the crowds and smoke, proud and glad and sure of myself” (126). Moreover, in the beginning it had not crossed her mind that street beggars existed in London. Eventually, she would give them charity and feel proud because she has more money than someone English even if a beggar. “I used to smile at people who stopped me in the street, not knowing what they wanted at first, until I discovered that there were actually beggars in London. I gave them money, full of pride that I was richer than at least one English person, even if he was a beggar” (119-120). But above all, when she surrenders her dear and long-protected virginity to her boyfriend, who is appalled rather than flattered at the discovery, she does it because he is English, someone from this great country which rules half the world. She expresses her feeling of inferiority in the following extract:

I didn’t chew my fingers with regret at giving him my virginity, furious at my weakness in lying down for him, and taking this boy in my arms just because he was English, a citizen of that great nation which had once ruled half the globe; nor did I blame myself for having clung to the notion that I had severed



all links with my country just because I had travelled to London alone without any member of my family. Instead of striking my face and grieving aloud because my hymen was no longer intact. (110)

Even after “crossing the line” with the English boy, this feeling of inferiority is still pervasive (Al-Sanea 32). She wonders, “Is it because he’s an Englishman that he doesn’t feel proud he’s taken my virginity” (I Sweep 110)

As a reader, an importunate question comes to mind: where does this feeling of inferiority spring from? It would not be fair to expect the story or its author to address this question. The wider implications of the individual consciousness portrayed in the story to the question of how the Arab *self* sees the Western *other* cannot be lost on us when seen in the generic context of the treatment of the theme in Arabic literature. Hanan al-Shaykh in *I Sweep the Sun* is making a fresh approach to the theme in which the other is not seen as an oppressor but a saviour. The question still persists: where does this feeling of inferiority spring from? The irony is that it is not shown as engendered by an arrogant or disdainful attitude on the part of the Western other, whether on the individual or institutional level. The protagonist experiences nothing of the sort. On the contrary, her host society offers her opportunity. She, the uneducated Arab emigrant who barely speaks English, finds employment, shelter and a decent life. The inferiority is in fact a ‘carry-over’ feeling from her own culture, the story seems to point out. It is a reflection of the original marginal state of existence that the emigrant suffered in her homeland, of the repression of the political authority or social conventions left behind, but not quite forgotten, not quite cleansed of the subverted soul. Indeed, I do agree to some extent with Rasheed El-Enany that this feeling of inferiority is because “the culture of the self loses ground to the culture of the other” (7). In other words, the protagonist compares between herself in the Arab society and in the Western one. She compares between what she had in her Arab homeland and what she has in the Western land, London. She compares between the way her family, neighbours, and friends used to deal with her in the Arab society and the way the Londoners deal with her. Whatever situation she encounters in London, she compares with her life in her Arab community. She sums up this situation as follows:

In my imagination, I could feel the monotony of the days in my country, the poverty and the nothingness. I remembered the threatening looks of the men in the family, the attentive stares from the ones in the street, my mother’s harsh way of talking.... I was happy in London, free, mistress of myself and my pocket. Here it was impossible not to be happy. At home I thought I was ugly. I listened to the English boy singing the praises of my dark coloring and frizzy hair, felt him kiss me on the cheek with obvious pleasure whenever I cooked a



meal and when I came in from work, or when we sat watching television together, and found him waiting for me at the end of the road when for some reason I was late getting back. (I Sweep 126-127)

Our female protagonist here runs away from a double repression: she may share with males in her country “the monotony, the poverty and the nothingness,” but as a female she suffers the added repression of the men of the family and the neighbourhood, and of her mother, who despite her femaleness is appointed by dint of her age and family position custodian of the patriarchal mores of society. It is no wonder then that the warm climate and shining sun of her country mean nothing to her. When her English boyfriend wonders how she could leave the wonderful weather and the sunshine of her homeland and come to live under the clouds and misery of England, her answer is very telling in its simplicity: “What can I do with the sun? ... “Sweep it off the rooftops?” (126).

The story begins with a tense dramatic moment, after which the narrative takes us back to the beginning leading up to it before the situation is picked up again and redeveloped to the point of illumination. It begins with the moment when the protagonist discovers her English boyfriend with another man in her bed. She describes the situations as follows: “Like a thirsty horse I made for the water. But I wasn’t thirsty. I was on fire. I threw the water over the English boy and his friend, and fire blazed in my head and heart and between my legs...” (109). She goes on to describe their situation, her shock, and their cool or careless reaction to her anger:

They were both naked. They were lying in each other’s arms. I saw their uncircumcised members as clear as day and shuddered. That was the first time I’d seen a man’s penis up close and my mouth and throat went dry. I went dry between my legs for several seconds, then I charged again. Shocked, they started up, but they made no attempt to cover their nakedness. Then, as if they’d recovered from the surprise, they began to laugh, snorting and giggling in delight at the water being thrown at them, like two children playing a game. I must be dreaming, seeing the opposite of what I thought I was seeing... Their laughter so infuriated me ... I went out and slammed the door behind me ... repeating the same English phrase over and over again: “Just you wait and see.” Then I went on in Arabic: “You’ll be sorry. Everybody’s going to know. (116-118)

Momentarily unhinged at the sight of the two men, she screams and pours cold water over them before she dashes out to roam the streets of London and underground stations at night in a distraught state. The two men only laugh at her shock and fury, when she had expected



them to be “dumbfounded, wishing the floor would open up and swallow them in their embarrassment” (117). The protagonist’s shock increases when she rings her boyfriend’s sister in an attempt to share the shocking news with someone. The English boy’s sister has nothing to say but to rebuke her for calling her so late at night over a matter that was not the business of either of them.

I rang his sister from a pay phone. When she heard my voice, she asked dryly, “What do you want?”

“Your brother—” I began.

She cut in. “Are you getting me out of bed at this hour to talk to me about my brother?” she demanded.

“It’s urgent,” I replied.

At this she changed her tone, and asked quickly, “Is he all right?”

I told her what I had found out. She shouted at me, accusing me of being crazy to wake her up for that and telling me to keep my nose out of her brother’s business, especially since it was nothing to do with me... she told me never to phone her at this time of the night again, ... she continued, ‘my brother’s sexual proclivities aren’t any of your business, or mine either.’ (118-119)

As the protagonist wanders aimlessly in the streets of London, again she compares the image of the two English boys with an image of her native Arab villager, Saad. Who was Saad? Why does the free association of ideas produce in our protagonist’s consciousness this particular image at this particular moment? The answer to these questions, which arise at the beginning of the story, is something we do not know until we are very close to the end, when the woman returns home feeling clearer in the mind after her feverish walk in the streets of London.

I stood before my blond other self. Now the haze lifted and all the images became clear. I no longer had to push away the picture of Saad laid out on the floor, or banish from my imagination the sound of his huge voice, louder than the roaring of the wind, dumb forever. The women of the family struck their faces and smeared them with soot. Saad had taken his own life the night the news had gone around that he’d been caught voice, choking on the words, while his wife’s voice, which had always been quiet and low before, rose high into the air, followed by those of his daughters and his sisters. When Saad’s note proclaiming his innocence was discovered there was an outcry in the town. Saad’s family rushed to try and have their revenge on the witness who had announced the news like someone possessed, and who now cared less about Saad’s death than about convincing the whole community of what he



had seen in the hut that burning noonday. The town was divided between those who wanted Saad's name cleared and those who wanted the accusation against him proven even after his death. His soul would have no repose and would hover over the place, flying through the night. As I remembered, I laughed. My blond self-laughed at the people of my town. I imagined Saad lying down with the English boy and the two of them flirting and giggling together. (130-131)

There is an irony here. What is the irony in such situation? I will now explain what I mean by that. With the use of a technique termed flashback, Al-Shaykh wants to compare between the Arab native culture of the protagonist and the culture of West. When the protagonist surprises the two men in bed, a tragic image from her past life in her native village flickers in her consciousness by association: the image of 'Saad laid out on the floor motionless.' The irony stems from the different attitudes of the two cultures regarding homosexuality. The above passage clearly compares between the different attitudes of the two different cultures towards homosexuality. On the one hand, there is the narrator's Arab conservative culture which leads to Saad's death (suicide), and on the other hand, there is the Western culture of the narrator's boyfriend where he is free to do whatever he wants wherever he wants. Saad was an ordinary family man from her village, who was rumoured to have been seen lying in a compromising way with a passing shepherd outside the village. Unable to live with the disgrace, he committed suicide and takes his own life on the same night, leaving behind a note protesting his innocence. The whole village is thrown in turmoil as Saad's family rises in quest of vengeance for his death. Herein lies the cultural irony I have referred to earlier. A proven homosexual act in London has no legal or social implications whatsoever; on the contrary, interference with which is considered an impingement on personal freedom, while a suspected, merely suspected, comparable act in an Arab village, where the grip of the social moral code on the individual is so relentless, leads to tragedy and bloodshed.

Furthermore, when our protagonist returns home, she is confronted by a different vision of herself as she walks through the door; herself as a tall blonde with coloured eyes. She imagines not only Saad but also many other people in her village and compares them with people she meets in London.

I imagined the beggar from the London streets sitting with the old woman Khadija in my town; the conductor on the red London bus talking to Hammouda the postman; the English boy's friends playing with Khadija's grandson, especially Margaret, whose hair reminded me of the colored duster Khadija's grandson had pleaded for every time he saw it in the market, thinking it was a toy or a bird. I saw Margaret talking to Saniyya in the



bathroom. I saw people springing up from the ground or coming down out of the sky, boarding red buses, jabbering in English. Englishmen climbing the ancient wall with their bowler hats and black umbrellas and Englishwomen pushing their strollers along the winding muddy roads. (131-132)

The narrative continues and in a playful transvestite act, her boyfriend's friend had put on her clothes, earrings and make-up, and was swaying to the tunes of an Arab song. "I stood before my blond other self. Now the haze lifted and all the images became clear" is how she describes her reaction (130). In her bewilderment she wonders: "What I was doing here. Why didn't I go home to my own country...? Why was I here? (129). Again, freedom seems to be the answer:

Was it because I was out of reach of the prying eyes of the people in my town, the constant questions from the men in my family about my comings and goings, and my mother's interrogations about why I slept on my stomach, or why I took so long in the bathroom? (129-130).

The story however, harbours a great irony which gives it its total significance and explains the protagonist's final acceptance of the other's morality, shocking as it is to her own Eastern sensibility. This transformation is of course symbolic of the complete embracement of the values of the other. It is her 'blonde self' that now thinks clearly, her shock and anger gone. The difference of the Western "other" is accepted. Indeed, as to both the writer and the narrator the Western culture is implicitly seen as superior to the values of the old Arab self, so to speak. The transformed 'blonde self' now realises in a vague sort of way that the values of the other which allow a much wider margin of individual freedom within society would have kept Saad alive if they had prevailed in her own culture.

Back in her village, our protagonist used to throw stones, in common with her folk, at flying pigeons. When a pigeon was hit and dropped to the ground, it was killed and eaten. Now in London, she leaves food for the pigeons on the window ledge. She speaks to the pigeon: "You're lucky I'm feeding you, not eating you. Where I come from, if we see a pigeon we throw a stone at it. If it falls we accept our good fortune, kill it and eat it" (133). The symbolism of this change should not be lost on us either. This is another aspect of the adopted 'blonde self', no doubt; one that respects the freedom and right to existence of the bird, and sees in it, for the first time, a beautiful creature of nature and not an article of food. Nothing sums up the story's expression of the total acceptance by the self of the other better than the woman's words to a pigeon, on which the story ends: "You're not beautiful, you're not white, or even a nice light brown. You're gray and black like a big rat, but I love you because you're English and you wait for me every day (133). Indeed, this statement does not



bring something unfamiliar. It is just a sum up of the irony that is pervasive from the very beginning of the story till its end. As it is shown in the story, the irony is that the 'local cultural originality' is rejected by the 'local' heroine in favour of the 'alien' cultural values of the other.

My conclusion of this paper is in line with Susan Fischer's remarks that "post-colonialism and patriarchy force these migrants into economic relations in which they are exploited, and, in the text under discussion, the female body is also a site of colonialization" (116). Al-Shaykh's protagonist is marginalized. She struggles to cast off poverty and other restrictions by coming to London to remake her life. Indeed, in London, the protagonist finds ways, which would not be available to her at "home," of constituting hybrid identities, which resist societal norms. For Al-Shaykh's characters, London offers—at least on an individual level—the potential for the "destabilisation of imperial arrangements" (Jacobs 4). As this character stakes out sites of resistance against exclusion, she recreates a sense of belonging and a complex new identity in the global city. She has experienced difficulties: living in the house of Aisha as servant. Yet there is, at the end of the novel, the sense that she has begun to reinvent herself in ways that are not possible in her back home but possible 'only in London'. Considering the disfigured and malformed image of Arabs in some Western writings and their Hollywood movies, Arab literary writings offering a corrective view of the civilizational identity of Arabs have become significant in the present context more than ever before. Exploring the themes of the Arab literary works can create a site for understanding the complexities of the Arab identities, politics, and culture. Further academic studies on Arab writing can help to create an interest among non-Arabs to read the texts and develop a better understanding of Arabs in terms of their cultural identities. Further research in the field would help both Arab and Western writers rectify their misconceptions about the 'other'. The need of the hour is a wider international readership conscious of the fact that cultural boundaries cannot be crossed without diminishing prejudice and misrepresentation. In order for transnational writings to achieve their goals, Arab writers should write back to represent a corrective view of the Arab emigrant in Western community. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a foundation for further research in this field, and that further studies can be carried out on the views expressed through this paper.

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