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The Historical Context and Reception of the First Arabic-Lesbian Novel, *I Am You*, by Elham Mansour

> *- Yes, they're deviant, from the norm that is, because heterosexual relationships form the general rule while homosexual ones are deviations and for this reason they're labeled as abnormal.*
>
> *- Does this abnormality imply illness?*
>
> *- …That's the general opinion, but I don't see it as an illness—I see deviation from the familiar norm, that's all.*[1]

So what does a contemporary novel involving modern Arab lesbians and bisexuals look like? Are there many such novels? Are they diverse in their representations? Who writes them and who reads them? And what are the prevailing societal attitudes that they necessarily imply?

It was into a cultural and social climate similar to 1950s USA that *Ana Hiya Anti*, the first Arabic, lesbian-centred novel, entered.[2] Lesbian pulp fiction which dominated the fifties in America predominantly yielded a host of negative connotations related to women who loved women, and these negative connotations were significantly without subtlety with regard to the attitudes they sought to project. It is not very difficult to infer societal attitudes towards homosexual women from titles such as *Unnatural*, *Forbidden*, *Warped Desire*, *Killer Dyke*, *The Unashamed*, *The Third Sex*, *Twilight Girl*, *Her Raging*

Needs, *Lesbian Hell* and *No Men Allowed*.[3] The titles project sensuous connotations as to the nature of this *deviance*. Here, deviance is not a mathematical term, equalised by its relations to the central deviation on a graph. Here deviance is unsightly; it is sly, it belongs to the world of darkness and lack of decorum, dissipation and lack of moral discipline. The deviants are exclusionary and "warped," they inhabit hellish places and prey on the weak, their ends are usually tortuous and dramatic, their lives twisted and highly immoral.

Admittedly, even as early as the 1950s and 1960s some pulp fiction titles were seeking to address the negative images of female homosexuality portrayed in pulp novels and cinema such as Ann Bannon's novels, beginning as early as 1957 with *Odd Girl Out*.[4] In the gay consciousness, this brought on and reflected a realisation of the importance of promoting positive public relations between sexual deviants (read: homosexuals) and the moral mass. Increasingly, depictions of homosexuality, particularly in western societies, are becoming depictions which take into account the personal experiences of their subjects. What is accelerating in production in the West is material representing homosexuality without it being reviled. In the Middle East, discussion of sexuality in general has become heavily laden with secrecy and reticence, and depictions of homosexuality necessarily suffer from such rising conservatism.

When *Ana Hiya Anti* was published in Beirut in the year 2000, a rather temperate and calm sea of oblivion dominated, and if not oblivion, then it was the appearance of ultimate consensus on the public front: that homosexuality *is* a disease, that it *is* distasteful, unnatural, sinful and indicative of weakness of the will.[5] A person speaking to the contrary meets staunch opposition, whereas a person supporting the negative beliefs

never needs to justify them. *Ana Hiya Anti*, which translates as *I Am You* (all feminine pronouns in the original language) is centred on the experiences of three main characters. Siham, the youngest of the trio, is a young woman who is coming to terms with her sexual identity and her exclusive desire for women. Layal is the (supposedly) heterosexual professor at university on whom Siham becomes transferentially fixated when Layal decides to mentor Siham and to review her poetry. Much of the novel is dedicated to Siham's adolescent writings, which predominantly fall in the genre of Sapphic love poetry. Finally, we meet Meemee, a young and attractive married woman with children, who no longer enjoys sexual relations with her husband. Meemee is also fixated on Layal (who lives in the same building) and is in the midst of extricating herself from the irritating "old hag," a widowed neighbour, with whom she has sexual relations.

Elham Mansour, the author of *Ana Hiya Anti*, was an established writer when her novel came out in the closing months of the year 2000. She had just completed the second novel of her trilogy of novels centred on her protagonist Hiba, who mirrors the author in some biographical respects as well as the protagonist Layal, in *I Am You* (the third instalment of the trilogy comes shortly after the publication of *I Am You*). Mansour was born in Ba'albek, Lebanon—a tourist attraction which proudly boasts ancient Roman ruins that have improbably survived fifteen years of war. Mansour went to school in Jounieh, another famous, sea-side tourist attraction constituted predominantly of Christian Lebanese families. She received her Bachelor of Psychology from L'Ecole des Lettres in Lebanon and was awarded her Doctorate of Philosophy from Sorbonne University where she completed her thesis on "the concept of liberation in contemporary political thought."[6] Doctor Mansour was the chair of the Philosophy department at the

Lebanese University when *I Am You* was released, and continues to hold that position. She kindly forwarded me a collection of reviews and articles written about the novel around the time of its release. To this collection of critiques I owe considerable debt in formulating my insights into the reception of this novel and into consolidating my theory of the Arabian epistemology of homosexuality in its present configuration.

When it was published, *Ana Hiya Anti* generated a little over a dozen newspaper reviews, and yet it was considered a best seller for some time. It was distributed internationally, with a particular demand for it in the Saudi Arabian market.[7] The reviews predominantly agreed that Mansour's novel was poor in composition, structure and logic. It is difficult to believe that the virulent attacks on structure, language and logic were not in part a result of reactions to the subject matter and the rhetoric deployed in the novel in regard to homosexuality. Mansour defended against the notion that her text was not artful with the assertion that all storytellers possessed their own personal techniques.[8] This onslaught of criticism appeared to be significantly motivated by hidden moral prerogatives, but of course occasionally there were ambivalent exceptions. I am less interested in defending *I Am You* against the accusations that it was "poorly written" than in the qualities of culture that this form of critique reveals. I therefore do not intend to demonstrate or to argue that *I Am You* is *not* poorly written—in my opinion it does appear to be hastily written—it is the novel's political and rhetorical attributes, regardless of form and structure, that concern me in this article. I am interested in this text for the clusters of ideas it presents, for the societal attitudes it simultaneously implies and challenges rather than for its "literary" value.[9]

Reviewing *I Am You* in Lebanon

Writing for the prominent literary magazine *Al-Naqid,* Pierre Shalhoob claimed that "despite [the characters'] level of education, the way they express their emotions and feelings is littered with superficial and clichéd sentences and words."[10] Shalhoob however, does not criticise Mansour's characters for their sexual deviations; instead, and unusually, he sympathises with the characters. "[E]ach one of them," he writes "is searching for a partner, not simply to satisfy their lust but to find a woman who can complete their beings."

Qasim Nouri Abood affirmed that the text ignored the "meaning and the form" of literary writing and added that the

> publication of this book should not be considered an error or a "slip-up," but to the contrary it is necessary for two reasons: the first is the sensitivity involving the topic… and the second, what the story presents in excess of ambiguity of meaning and ignoring narrative skill (al-tikaniya) is what distinguishes a great deal of the present Arab publications in poetry and story telling.[11]

While it might seem that Abood did not object to the subject matter, his understanding of it is clearly inscribed in his reference to homosexual love as *hub athim* ("sinful love"), and his wish to see more of its "conflicted psychology" in the novel. For Abood, the "lesbians" simply did not suffer enough. This attitude towards homosexuality is shared by a number of critics who reviewed the book. Yasseen Rafa'iyah concluded that "it is true that the subject matter is very daring, but this is not enough. We can't just write it any which way, the subject needs caution and entry into its depths, because the subject of lesbianism is the suffering of Woman, in the same way that sodomy [read as homosexuality] is the suffering of the Man and they are both a dangerous illness."[12] Rafa'iah and other critics conveying this view of homosexuality are fixated upon

Mansour's inability to deliver a conclusive discussion of "causes and reasons" for homosexual relations. Rafa'iah is particularly fixated by the notion that Siham was sexually assaulted by her father and that Mansour should have stressed this as the cause of Siham's homosexuality. He fails to mention, as though he did not realise, that Siham later admits to having fabricated the story, partly from her desire to find a cause and partly to lure Layal (the unrequited object of her affection) to "fall for her." Predominantly however, Siham's desire to find causes for her sexual orientation stems from societal claims (as exemplified by Rafai'iah and other critics) that an incidental cause *must* exist. Several critics have exploited Siham's confused relations with her now-deceased father. Amina Ghusun, in a scathing review, also attributes Siham's homosexuality to rape by her father and she also fails to note that this is negated later in the story. She concludes from her moral high ground, without hesitation: "[i]t is as though the reader of *I Am You* is [presumed to be] unnerved by what is forbidden, or any taboo, and is rather irritated by Muslim women and morality and tastefulness."[13] She too criticises Mansour for her "poor" literary techniques.

In Moody Bittar's contribution, the novel is again said to be "poorly written" and the poetry (written by Siham) in it is "laughable." He too criticises Mansour for not providing clear reasons for Siham's homosexuality. He adds: "Mansour's protagonists are invasive and sex-obsessed. They are held captive by their obsessions and their insane desires regardless of how much physical and social danger this leads them to."[14] Another reviewer writing in this vein criticises Mansour for depicting relationships between women as being "better than the *natural* relationship between the woman and the man"[15] (my emphasis). Maree Al-Qaseefee claims that the novel is poorly written and

that it resembles a short documentary interviewing two or three people "who specialise in this activity" (as though it were a sport). Al-Qasseefee praises Mansour for her pioneering work and for daring to interrogate the relationship between "artistic and literary genius and sexual deviation," as well as the role that the "male plays in driving women into the arms of other women due to his selfishness, carelessness and harshness. But does this mean that the woman will definitely find compensation in a homosexual relationship? This is not what the novel concludes with any certainty."[16] Al-Qasseefee's intermediate-level tolerance for this subject is admirable, even though her understanding fails to register the novel's claims about homosexuality. Al-Qasseefee is quick to attribute female homosexuality to the harshness of men, whereas the novel does not exclusively discuss this point, nor does it at all suggest that women who have been hurt by men will be able to, or do, substitute heterosexual relations for homosexual ones.

It would seem that the majority of negative reviews rest their cases on two points: the first is that the text is poorly written, the second is that the subject of homosexuality *is* distasteful and unnatural or caused by traumatic incidents and thus it is the moral role of the narrative to reveal this,[17] therefore Mansour's rhetoric (through the character Layal) of conceiving homosexuality as natural is wrong, ill-conceived and irresponsible.

As is indicated by these reviews, the contemporary popular Arabian epistemology of female homosexuality seems to be based on the following assumptions:

a) Women *turn* to other women due to the "harshness" of men.
b) Women *turn* to other women due to experience of sexual trauma (with men).
c) Women *turning* to other women are immoral, deranged, and suffer mental ailments.
d) Homosexuality is caused by something whose value is unequal to the value of the presumed causes of heterosexuality (i.e. procreation/ "nature"/"God's intent").
e) The cause of homosexuality is usually an aberration of upbringing.

Even though *I Am You*'s major character Siham searches for causes of her homosexuality, she finally has to reconcile herself to the fact that these causes are either non-existent or impossible to discern, a point the critics (deliberately?) fail to engage with. It is as though they are unable to grasp the concept of acausality because it is somehow a new approach to an old "problem" which was thought to be clearly understood, not only morally but also psychologically. Addressing these popular Arabian epistemes of female homosexuality, Mansour remarked in an interview with Zeina Bizzie that:

> our desire to change [the other], stems from our thinking that there is something wrong about the thing we want to change. And we presume homosexual relationships to be wrong. So what is the truth and on what basis have we founded our gauge of what is right and wrong? Everything is relative and what our societies reject, others accept, and what is rejected now, people will accept in the future. Therefore there are no fixed factors to be relied on….[18]

Mansour's novel was difficult for the critics to like, not only for its deliberately direct use of language,[19] but also for the ideology and rhetoric which it propagates in regards to homosexuality. The novel's rationalisation of homosexual relationships seemed foreign to Arab critics, and it shocked them further because it was not achieved through preamble and circumvention, but through blatant and unambiguous declarations, such as Layal's profession that: "I am against moral evaluation when it comes to this subject—I am all for individual freedom, and as long as that freedom harms no one, then it is legitimate, in my opinion" (94). These declarations Mansour has had to re-iterate to her critics, who seem to have missed the various points she has taken up throughout her narrative. In the three interviews conducted with her shortly after the release of her novel, she stressed that homosexuality is a matter that is ignored by society and that it should be a matter returned to the arena of public discussion. In this statement, she was in fact

recalling remarks she assigned her characters in the novel, as can be seen in the following:

> As for us here [homosexuality] is muffled because we are still in the magical pattern of thought. We think that being silent about a reality of some sort enables us to eliminate it. Yes, eliminate it from our thoughts, so that it nests in our bodies and our subconscious and so that it reflects itself throughout all our behaviours without our knowledge (59-60).
>
> [My mother] is like the ostrich, burying her head so that she won't see. She may as well stay in her blindness or pretend blindness, the important thing is that she stays out of my affairs (77).

In the interviews Mansour also stressed that the Platonic concept of love[20] was the philosophical point she wished to explore foremost (even more so than homosexual relationships), and that it was "on this concept that the entire Greek philosophical system was based."[21] In Mansour's novel, Layal claims:

> I believe that the like realises the like, meaning that a woman is looking, in her relationship with a man, for what completes her femininity, in the same way the man searches for what completes his masculinity in his relationship with a woman…. If this analysis is true then it explains that in homosexual relationships, the sex of the other is not as important as the complementarity of the like. This completeness can be within the same sex, as is the case with lesbians and gays, or between different sexes as seen in the general governing rule (139-140).

This theoretical framework standardises the experience of love as universal and does away with the distinction between hetero- and homosexual love,[22] a distinction adamantly defended by conservative thinkers and writers who reject the nature and humanity of homosexual or bisexual inclinations. It was these ideas that she hoped to project, and it was precisely these that the critics avoided discussing, presumably because these ideas arrived on the scene suddenly and without significant precedent or

preparation, and, for many readers, without the (liberationist) theoretical context they embody. Clashing with Mansour on this point, one interviewer commented to her,

> The psychological elements in this novel do not reveal the motives or the reasons behind the characters. In reality, and don't get upset with me, I found nothing except very little of this [form of revelation]. Where is the psychological analysis of your novel's characters? You say you come to the art of the novel from a philosophy and psychology background, where is the philosophy and psychology in this novel?[23]

While the majority of the reviews were choric in their condemnation of homosexual interests and the author's writing techniques, Hanneen Ghadar was of the opinion that the writing was too timid, that although sex and the penetration of taboos were promised, the language fell short of new and refreshing descriptions. She added in a review which combined several recently released novels on the subject of sex, that even women writers presented their heroines "in the traditional manner that men have depicted them" (i.e. as passive recipients of pleasure). Specifically of *I Am You* she commented that "Siham displays no sexual feelings (except through intermittent poetry between one disappointment and another)," quoting Siham's poem beginning with "I have not imagined you naked once" as evidence of her remark.[24] Later, Ghadar quotes lines which describe an orgy/party scene and comments: "three full stops [ellipsis] is what the author has left for the reader to imagine sexual activity between two women, three full stops!" Ghadar's review demands more woman-centred descriptions of sex and more explicit content. What Ghadar calls for is quite valid given the predominance of patriarchal rhetorical strategies involving descriptions of sex, sexuality and gender (in both literature and criticism) that position women as infinitely passive and receptive and men as virile and insatiable.

Even literary reviews themselves can engage in these traditionalist assumptions and attitudes about sex that Ghadar criticises, including two separate reviews of *I Am You* which stand out in this regard. George Tarad, who singularly notes that the novel is dedicated in its entirety to the defence of homosexuality, provides what is perhaps the closest thing to a positive review of the novel. However, he concludes his review with an attitude which makes clear that women's sexual contact with other women involves the spectatorship, curiosity and sometimes participation of men, and that men in particular will find the novel erotically charged and difficult to resist.[25] Another critic, who equally feels no need to disguise his impression of female homosexuality as supplemental to heterosexuality, adds that Mansour genuinely fails to show how a woman can replace the man in the sexual act (although he indicates his comprehension of how a man can take the position of a woman in a male homosexual sex act).[26]

In their collective entirety, these reviews reflect the ongoing cultural negotiations regarding sexuality and gender taking place within a society where tensions between the religious and the secular are always highly charged. While homophobic rhetorical strategies are found in abundance, and seem for the time being immutable, the continual agitations effected by scholars, artists and filmmakers which question social boundaries in relation to sex, gender and sexuality, should produce some positive reverberations. Eve Sedgwick once noted that an act of self-revelation (revealing oneself to be "gay" to someone of a homophobic persuasion) occasionally has the power of altering perceptions, of dispelling myths, even though she had no illusions about the extent of power that "individual revelation can exercise over scaled and institutionally embodied oppressions."[27] The socio-historical importance of *I Am You* is certainly not in its literary

methodology (though this methodology is impressive), but in its new rhetorical capacities as far as homosexuality is concerned. The reader is presented with a protagonist that s/he can at once both criticise and feel sympathetic towards, a protagonist who is at least realist, if not real.

The Cultural Import of *I Am You*

Nuray Sakalli and Ozanser Ugurlu recently conducted an experiment in order to ascertain "whether we could observe an attitude change in heterosexual participants introduced to a lesbian person."[28] The subjects of their experiment were all undergraduate students at the Middle East Technical University in Turkey (which might render the sample socio-economically biased). The report found that "the study demonstrated that individuals might change their attitudes toward homosexuality in a positive way after learning about homosexuals and having positive experience with them. The study supported results of the previous study in Turkey… that people who knew a homosexual individual and homosexuality were not very uncomfortable about [it], and they increased their tolerance… even though they did not completely accept homosexuals and homosexuality."[29] Another study, conducted by sociologists at the University of Oklahoma "examined the impact of motion pictures about the [nontraditional] family on viewers' attitudes about family life and sexual orientation."[30] In this study, women were found to be more tolerant of sexual difference than men and that "the treatment group [asked to watch pro-gay films] experienced more favourable attitudes toward homosexuals than the control group…"[31]

From the studies above we note that *how* homosexual individuals are represented in cultural discourse and literary artifacts not only reflects the predominant attitudes and beliefs of a culture but that this representation, in itself, is a key element in configuring cultural beliefs. The novel deserves readings informed by homophilia, not only homophobia, by critics whose life experiences were informed and affected by the prejudice surrounding the constitution of their sexual desires and not only by critics blissfully removed from the context and feelings of the protagonist Siham. *I Am You* was written with the intent of challenging conventional attitudes about homosexuality and it is culturally and historically important for this reason. While the critics were not at all erroneous in suggesting that there were many weaknesses in the text, none of them was willing to engage with its greatest accomplishment: its unmistakable introduction of homosexuality as a subject outside the realm of conventional moral behaviour and thought, whilst also falling short of western-style, pro-gay activism which may have alienated the majority of Arab readers. The novel's style remained uniquely Lebanese, and attempted to bring the reader into close intimacy with Siham, whose thoughts, feelings and self-realisation occasionally feel starkly real, hyperreal.

It is true, as some critics have noted, that its characters Siham and Meemee often invite dislike, through what seem to be superficial sexual obsessions and yearnings for things which cannot be fulfilled (the love of a supposedly heterosexual woman). Their lack of self-integration and fulfilment should be contextualised within the framework of prohibition which restricts these characters' ability to realise their desires. This is not a story about women who accept their desires unhesitantly or who can understand and act on them liberally. Siham, despite some growth towards self-acceptance as the narrative

evolves, is always trapped between excessively idolatrous love for "Woman," born out of pining, and a deeply ingrained, defensive kind of misogyny, born out of a cultural phenomenon wherein closeted women are unable to form stable relationships, because their natural sexual urges are competing very heavily with their urges for social acceptance, or at least social anonymity. In one of her poems Siham writes of this dividedness and disloyalty amongst those women whom she has known in a sexual manner. Earlier in her poem she has set up Layal, the unresponsive "heterosexual" object of her affection, to be in the City of Saffron, while she suffers in the City of Mint:

> Where I am in the City of Mint, the women are controlling, deprived, they talk sadness to each other and they consult each other about the prey. They leave at night and they search for the bridge of promise that ties the two cities together [in the City of Saffron women "leave everything full of tenderness"], but they become hungry in the street and so they eat each other, and so I see the world, small, and I pray that the world may expand until there is a flood that erases the two cities (193-194).

The grinding of saffron (Sahq Al-Za'faran) was once quite a common euphemism for female homosexual activity; in fact the Arabic word for lesbian, *Suhaqiya*, can be transliterated as "grinder." The euphemism originates from medieval Arabic literature, appearing in various texts as early as the ninth century. Siham may be implying that the City of Saffron is inhabited by women who are capable of carrying out intimate and emotionally fulfilling relations (without evacuating the deeply sexual element of these emotional relationships). In the meantime, the women in the City of Mint inhabit a hellish underworld where homosexual behaviour is either used as a convenient substitute for heterosexual encounters or where women, through fear of ostracism, are incapable of forging intimate (emotional) relations. In addition, the tragedy of this text, the mentioning of cities outside the literal war context (for the war described here is highly figurative),

completely undermines the tragedy of civil war in Lebanon or the tragedy of anything bigger than Siham being unable to live in a society that allows her to feel natural. In this way Mansour creates a fissure in mainstream intellectual thought and makes the marginal a central element in configuring the universal. Although the novel is set during the Lebanese civil war (I will discuss this in more detail later on) some time in the 1980s, the war depicted in *I Am You* is decentred from its literal manifestations: it is a war waged much more quietly, against the individual and the marginal in society, or rather, on a more encompassing political scale, against *heterogeneity* itself. The war depicted is a socio-political war in every ontological sense of the word and it suffuses the novel, its characters and their conflicted behaviours. The relationships between *deviant* women reflect not simply their own internal chaos and disorder (as some critics have noted), but also *society's* inner contradictions and conflicts. The characters' brief and unfulfilling encounters are portrayed as not simply processes of their own production, since Siham's grief and alienation is owed largely to the "society [which] rejects me" (102, 122-123).

> Where we come from in Lebanon, the lesbian is an outcast, she can't reveal what she is, she tries to hide herself, so much so that those who observe our society are incapable of finding any evidence to suggest that she exists. And if you were to find relationships of this kind, and they do indeed exist, you'll see that they are pursued with the utmost secrecy, without the emergence of any visible traces (24).

War on Sexuality, the Body and the "Feminine Discourse"

Lebanon is a small country with a surface area of 10,400 square kilometres and a current population of 3.7 million.[32] In April 1975 the Lebanese Civil War began and continued until 1991. In the course of that history the war story unfolded, with old enemies becoming obsolete and fresh ones replacing them. What originally began as a conflict

involving Palestinian militants and Lebanese Muslim militias versus the Lebanese Christian militias (joined briefly by the Israeli army), progressed into a conflict between the Lebanese Christian Militia and the Syrian army,[33] and finally ended with a "war of unification" resulting from a schism within the Lebanese Christian forces themselves. The Lebanese war was brutal, controlled, and chaotic. In one instance militiamen would massacre entire villages or refugee camp populations (for example, Tal Izzatar, Sabra and Shatila), dismembering children and adults alike, and in another instance, as Miriam Cooke notes, Beirut's bank buildings, located on one street, would remain unscathed no matter how heavy the combat became.[34]

Lebanon dramatises for us a condition of war and conflicting puritanisms within which homosexuality seems to cause no more than an obscure blot of prejudice, that is (seen to be) scarcely worth dealing with, in light of the more immediate concerns and grave dangers which present themselves in this historical context. Mansour's project in this novel is to critique the obviation of the subject of sexuality and to bring it to the fore, in the hope of reshaping, or revitalising (feminist) political activism against various social, political and military systems and means of oppression.

> Even the feminist movement in Lebanon isn't brave enough to broach the subject [of homosexuality]. It's prohibited, shameful and a sign of decadence, and illness… (24).

Within this cultural framework where sexual liberty is deemed secondary to other concerns, war features (in the novel) as a further means of exacting oppressions of all kinds.

In her relationship to war and our view of her interaction with it taking place, Layal represents one of many civilians who could scarcely understand the war's reasons

or origins, *and* who were powerless because they themselves were divided confessionally (i.e divided by various religions and denominations), and because they had no agency or infrastructure with which to act as a people united by the desire for good will amongst each other. Layal's powerlessness can be seen in her confessed lack of understanding as in the following:

> It's true what Meemee said, about how her husband knows [when there are] peaceful periods…. How does he know that and what is his role in the subject? I don't want to know that either, that's not the only issue I don't understand in this war, the important thing is that the situation is calm and I have to take advantage of it (129).

Layal's ignorance of political matters is abundantly clear. She seems to inhabit a role in the conflict, a role of powerlessness and insignificance, which resembles Siham's similarly subordinate position in the moral war waged against homosexual desires. Symbolically, the war is an affair managed and *understood* by men. Interestingly, Layal is positioned in such a way as to usher in a new generation of Lebanese feminists who are preoccupied with liberating women from prohibitions and constraints, one of which includes the sexual. Evelyn Accad notes that when she attended a feminist conference in Illinois 1983,

> [m]ostly Marxist Women, speaking in the name of Third World Women, claimed that economic issues, such as food and shelter, were far more important than sex. They accused U.S. lesbians at the conference of over-emphasising sex, particularly lesbianism….[However] sex is one of the basic needs—like food and sleep—in any culture… [and] no mention was made of the spiritual and/or psychological needs for love, affection, and tenderness, intimately connected with sexuality, felt by people in most cultures.[35]

What Accad records is a schism prevalent within the global feminist movement. It is also a point which Mansour makes in her novel *Hina Kuntu Rajulan*.[36] What emerges in

Mansour's rhetoric is a new third world feminism, which is now attuned to erotic desires and which sees them as equal to, if not more pressing than, issues of national liberation and women's needs in a more general sense. Mansour's rhetoric seems to have inherited the legacy of a sexually aware third world feminism which Accad claims as the necessary evolutionary step towards reconciling the schism between third world and first world feminists in her 1990 study *Sexuality and War*. What is significant in Mansour's brand of feminism is that it is a work which privileges a woman-centred discourse, what she terms as "feminine discourse,"[37] in which female sexuality, with its various formations, is a key issue at stake and where not only issues involving economic and national concerns are deemed important. Contrary to the critics' choric assertions that *I Am You* is a work of shallow proportions, the novel seemed confounding because it was *inventing* a feminist tradition in a country where nationalist concerns blurred the core of feminist ideals and struggles.[38] Mansour's women interact with an array of prohibitions and sexual taxonomies enforced upon individuals, severely limiting their life choices. Mansour achieves this through each of her main characters: whether through Meemee, who married because "what [else] was I supposed to do?" (143), Layal—who rejects relations with men because of their misogyny and power-obsessions—or the "old hag" (who represents duplicitous "moral" women who commit the deeds but retain a superficial but applauded chastity), or whether through Siham whose moral and sexual dilemmas are more obvious and urgent. The characters' inner conflicts, as well as the conflict they seem to be engaged in with society, are a result of their search for balance (between what they have, lack and need) and, as far as Layal and Siham are concerned, a search for

equality (whether with men or with heterosexuals) and liberty (from social conventions) also, as Layal comments:

> I'm not married because I want to be free. I'm not against men at all, but I'm against the commitment that imposes obligations and duties. I am all for liberal relationships based on agreement and love because these continue so long as they are successful, and once they fail, every one goes his own way without ceremonies or demands… (90-91).

Layal is proposing something quite astonishing to the society in which she lives: an end to the dominion that the institution of marriage holds over the regulation of relations in this particular society. Of course her search for these liberties mirrors Siham's, who is equally searching for means to legitimise her desires. It is no wonder that the two characters discover a shared philosophical agreement with each other as regards the notion that love and the rules of attraction are based on similarity rather than difference (168-169). Towards the end of the narrative, and her struggle, Siham finally asserts the primacy of her feelings over forced social obligations, succeeding in establishing the new (lesbian) "feminine discourse" in its primitive form:

> Nothing arouses me except the female form, for the female body has a great effect on me and it is what awakens desire within me. What am I guilty of exactly if I can only feel the pleasure of love with a woman? It's love, and the purpose of making love is attaining pleasure and satisfaction (170).

Here a woman harbouring homosexual desires is given the opportunity of citation, which is rare. We do not hear in the contemporary Arab mainstream that homosexual relations between women are based on desire. The absence of the homosexual subject, her relegation to a closet out of which exit is hardly an option, has dominated discourse on homosexuality in this region since the late Middle Ages. The result has been the production and the reinforcement of a negative (and ill-informed) discourse,

strengthening the "moral" grounds for the repression and oppression undertaken in society and by its individuals. Siham is an important character because she refreshes the discourse, allowing to enter into it a point of view for the deviant, and revealing a creature hardly in a position to cause damage to society (as any homophobic discourse suggests) and one who cannot be feared on account of her vulnerability and the injuries she endures. But of course a society with such deep-seated ideas about sexuality and its causes will reject this novel, as the reviews of the novel discussed earlier demonstrate. This will, however, be a superficial rejection, taking place in the newspapers and at the public front; but somewhere in the privacy of consciousness, the humane representation of homosexual, bisexual and sexually ambiguous subjects will begin to effect some changes in perception.

The "feminine discourse" urged by Mansour is also to be found in discussions of sexual relations between women, who perceive each other (in this cultural context) as equals. After Siham returns from Paris, she looks retrospectively at what comforted her about being with the Parisian schoolgirl Clare, her first lover, and she writes:

> Clare, who is taintless, makes the Arabian Jasmine wonder at her purity and the sea foam asks after how she melts (73).

I think, if only for amusement, the sentence should read "Clare who is French," for in some way her nationality renders her somewhat exotic. At any rate, Siham continues:

> Clare unveils the treasures of her body and the sun intermixes with the waves and the berries emerge deliciously and it's time to eat, Clare devours passion and finds pleasure, she knows the secrets of love and its ways and she flirts, Clare and freedom is in her dress, she undresses, she does not want to remain a prisoner, and she blows her cigarettes in a blonde cup, so who is Clare drinking and who is drinking her? (73)

Here Siham demonstrates knowledge of a sexual/love relationship which was experienced in an environment that was potentially a lot less hostile than Siham's birthplace, Beirut, and certainly less hostile religiously and ideologically to the idea of homosexual love or eroticism. Clare does not belong in the hostile City of Mint (discussed earlier), perhaps not in Layal's (idealised) City of Saffron either, but Clare takes Siham to a place where the lines between the passive and active elements of sexual practice are obscured and made obsolete: "she blows her cigarettes in a blonde cup, so who is Clare drinking and who is drinking her?" This notion overturns patriarchal concepts wherein sexual energy converts into power, which is what seems to be the problem with the women in the City of Mint who "get hungry on their way and eat each other in the street." The novel seems to suggest that it is not only men who are engaged in a patriarchal sexual symbolic order, but also some women.[39] By doing this, the text undermines the mainstream concept of the sex act as one of power and instead conveys sexual activity pointing to the equal agency of its participants, where alternative (female) masculinities and (non-heterosexual) femininities are depicted and intermixed.[40] This *queer* idea always presents itself as coming from *outside*, *abroad*. It is foreign (in this particular instance it is literally from Paris), it is not local but peripheral—it is always marginal and defeated (even in Paris, this idea retains a marginal status since we learn that the schoolgirls keep displays of intimacy and affection for their private concerts). However, the novel does not fall into a stereotypical depiction of this concept of sexual equality as being a strictly western concept. For example, at Meemee's ladies-only party Layal observes women around her:

> she attempted to observe how some of them took on a man's role and how the others took on the woman's role, as it was generally understood of these relationships—that is, in terms of what takes place between the normal woman and man. After some surveillance she noticed that the difference was only in outward appearance, because the actions were the same in the sense that whoever took on the man's role in one instant, soon took on the woman's in another (127).

Even Layal's naïve coupling of the "man's role" to denote activity/masculinity and the "woman's role" to denote passivity/femininity is soon challenged by a guest at the party, who is shocked by Layal's suggestion that active behaviour necessarily denotes maleness (which is here conflated with masculinity). The partygoer protests that ""I'm a woman and I don't want to be male, if I am doing now whatever I like with her," and she pointed at her girlfriend "that does not mean that I'm her man, we're alike and she often desires to do with me what I do with her now, we have no roles in our relationship. We're lovers and that's more important" (128). Through Layal's naivety, the reader, who is expected to be equally naïve (since the target audience was initially conceived to be a mainstream [i.e. non-queer] Arab readership), is eased into complex concepts of gender and sexuality which challenge patriarchal hetero-normativity.

The novel raises further (unconventional) awareness of the issue of homosexuality among its readers through its exploitation of the transnational setting, revealing to its readership a world beyond the confines of the Lebanese nation—and how Lebanese culture treats the subject of homosexuality. For most of the critics reviewing this novel it seems that their knowledge of homosexuality was significantly lacking in that they did not know or experience any of the communities they criticised. Through Siham's experiences in Paris and references to a western gay civil rights movement, *I Am You* registers the cultural divide between the West and the East regarding issues of sexuality. Siham's mother discovers that her daughter's relationship with Clare, whose photograph

is displayed prominently on Siham's desk, is far from the chaste one that *she*, as a child, had had with one of her girl friends. As a response to this aberration, the mother contacts Clare and hurls abuse at her over the phone. Siham's mother's reflection on making this phone-call to her daughter, who (falsely) denies any sexual intimacy in her relationship with Clare, is as follows:

> Yes, she is free [to do whatever she likes] and we have nothing to do with her. If you continue to be her friend she will influence you…. We can go back to Lebanon together… and you can continue your university education there—we can endure the war just like everybody else. If you want to know the truth I prefer war and its dangers to the cesspools of Paris and its depraved world. I don't want to lose you and I don't want you to befriend people of this perverted kind. We still preserve in Lebanon a certain degree of morals and good behaviour. I don't want your education, regardless of its importance, to deprive you of these high morals that we have inherited from our forefathers and predecessors (27).

Clare, being French, is to a great extent free to be a lesbian, while Siham, who is Lebanese, is not as free. Clare, under the traditional Arab mother's gaze, exists in a "depraved world" which acts easily as a potential contagion for our upright protagonist, Siham. It is a world that is far more dangerous than the Lebanese Civil War and is less favourable to live in—a thought that is in itself indicative of the degree of refusal in question and the mother's insensitivity to the carnage produced by the war. In lieu of Clare's liberal unclosetedness there was, until recently, in Lebanon a physical and literal necessity for closetedness as means of survival, and Clare genuinely fails to show any sensitivity to the cultural realities separating her activism from Siham's denial:

> Are you that backward in Lebanon? You say that your mother is educated and mature, what kind of maturity and education is this? I can accept her calling me a lesbian but for her to describe me as diseased and dirty, to accuse me of contaminating her daughter—I can't accept that at all! (23)

Clare, who must encounter a daily dose of diluted homophobia in France cannot comprehend that heavy dose of it that she will encounter under the hetero-normative Middle Eastern gaze, be it Muslim, Christian or Jewish. Nor can she begin to comprehend Siham's desire to continue to deceive her mother about her sexuality. For Clare this self-denial is precisely what gives society power over the individual. For Clare self-denial is also defeat, though the novel in itself fails to articulate clearly the Frenchwoman's motivations behind her political stance. In the meantime, Siham wants to deceive her mother because, so early in the development of her sexual identity she "always suffered a guilty conscience, swinging between her inclination and desire and her upbringing and all the moralism she received at home from her mother and at the nuns' school in Lebanon" (33).

In the conflict which arises between the two schoolgirls we glimpse a microcosm of the conflict between feminists denying the importance of a sexual revolution, championing the rights of third world women who are deprived of (what they see as) more important and more basic needs and other feminists, often from privileged first world countries, who champion the sexual liberation of woman in a way that suggests that this can be done *before* or even *without* dealing with the economic and political inequities from which both men and women suffer in third world nations. While Clare's uncompromising activism is necessary in shifting negative attitudes towards homosexuality, she fails to deal maturely or realistically with the difficulties and dangers Siham faces in doing this. The depiction of their relationship is not a simple and superficial treatment of a "cultural clash," but is allegorical of the conflicted relationship between the two nations. After all, it was the French who founded Lebanon by separating

it from Syria after World War I. In addition, perhaps without intending it, the author demonstrates the dangers inherent in the calls for a replication of the western gay and lesbian rights movement in the Middle East. What is needed is a new strategy, better suited to different cultural and social conditions, one which Siham fails to discover or even realise the need for throughout the novel—deception, self-denial and invisibility remain her only recourse.

The French, inseparable from their history of colonisation of the Middle East, have left a lasting impression on the nation that is now Lebanon. Siham attended one of the nuns' schools and it is in these schools that we note the colonial influence of the French, particularly on the Christian Lebanese. Etel Adnan observes that the nuns' schools "created in Lebanon and imposed on it, a system of education totally conforming to their schools in France, an education which had nothing to do with the history and the geography of the children involved,"[41] and the teaching of French as a prime language continues in all the Christian or French-funded schools today.

One could even say that the cultural rift created in Lebanon by French influence indirectly led to the sixteen-year civil war. The Lebanese, mostly the Christians residing in East Beirut and the northern parts of Lebanon, began to exhibit inclinations to Frenchness and westernisation that were less apparent in their Muslim counterparts, and they took on an identity that allied them (the Lebanese Forces and later the Lebanese Militia of Eastern Beirut—Kata'ab) with what is considered to be the nemesis of the Arab nationalist—Israel. And yet, within the novel and in society more generally, the Frenchised Christians seem to have learnt nothing more than fashion, language, perfume and music from the French: when the clash of cultural ideologies on sexuality occurs, the

Lebanese Christians of the early to late twentieth-century period, represented by Siham's mother, are not happy to emulate the French. Since the end of the civil war in 1991 there would undoubtedly have been some cultural changes (the growing influence of English and English speaking media and the decline in French influence being the most noted change, as well as an increase in secularity as a result of the end of confessional warfare), but the period in which the novel is set and the period it reflects pertain to a time when factions within Christian Lebanese communities/groups attempted to forge, in the same manner that the Turkish government has, an identity that identifies with the western (European) "other" more so that with the Arab "other," albeit that this identification is ornamental at best.

But I do not wish to delve too deeply into the speculative context in which this fascinating text was produced because, all in all, it is a very specific story and about specific individuals. The author communicated to me that she wrote this as a result of life experience; she wrote about people she met and people she knew.[42] Through Siham, Mansour explores how a homosexual individual who is lacking any formal acknowledgement of her existence comes to comprehend, realise and accept her sexuality against a backdrop of prejudice and refusal.

The Indigenous Deviant

The novel presents Siham as a masculine lesbian figure. Growing up in a society where the topic is not only forbidden but consequently unknown, Siham begins to conceptualise herself as the male-woman because her desire for women at this stage can only be

understood within the concepts and ideas available and sanctioned in the wider culture.[43] The author writes about Siham's pubescent period:

> She used to express her protest [about getting her period] by rejecting all forms of feminine attire, always wearing pants and button-up shirts, and could not be comfortable in anything other than boys' shoes. Her mother was pained to witness this… (11).

Siham, who from a very early age exhibits erotic feelings for women including her own mother and her primary school teacher, can initially only conceive this kind of love at the expense of her own femininity and femaleness because of the conceptual anorexia surrounding representations of the sexes and sexual orientation. On the other hand, Siham's exhibition of masculinity might be confused for a desire to be male, whereas it might stem from motivations which are entirely different from those presumed by patriarchal cultural configurations.

Siham only ever feels truly at ease when she is in Paris completing her final school-year. For her and other Middle Easterners like her, the west offers a democratic safe haven for sexual liberty, even though the west itself is not necessarily safe. Mansour writes that:

> Siham began her Parisian life with the utmost excitement. She was an intelligent girl; fearless, invasive of every unknown in order to learn its secrets. She was overwhelmed by this magical city and decided to discover its landmarks and worlds and in Paris there are many landmarks and many more worlds, but what designates entry into a particular world are the human's specific inclinations that draw them into walking through open doors; and in this magical city doors are flung wide open for the purposes of fulfilling desires and inclinations of all kind (12).

A girl who is intelligent and fearless may pursue her natural inclinations in a location such as Paris, but when she returns to Lebanon her relationships are limited to

meaningless sexual encounters with uncaring women, two unrequited love situations (only one of which was consummated), and she finally settles in a relationship with a married woman who is generally represented to be "as dumb as a brick."

And yet, even though *I Am You* is easily a transgressive text, it is still nevertheless restrained by the very forces of culture and society that it attempts to stretch. The local hero, Layal, understands the degree of ostracism homosexuals in Arab cultures face and does not want to instigate a revolution counter to the religious revolution. Layal is very practical in her thoughts, as "[s]he very well knew the extent of the danger caused by this subject in our society, for those people are scorned and no one understands them" (76). After embracing Siham, Layal says:

> I advise you, as you have done before, even if the matter is difficult at first, to socialise with young men. You might get attached to one of them and that will be the end of that. Think of marriage and childbearing, forget yourself and follow suit from the other girls. Try, even if this requires that you lie to yourself in the beginning (77).

Layal implies that if a woman is capable of resisting being with another woman and is also capable of carrying out an intimate relationship with a man then she is heterosexual enough. And it is better that a woman save herself from the social difficulties that present themselves in the event that one chooses to live out one's erotic urges, than to complicate her life by gratifying her senses. In the novel Layal's resistance of the sexual advances of Meemee presents itself as a little too difficult, minutely too difficult, for us not to suspect that there is a kind of heterosexuality which manifests itself as a discipline, where the heterosexuality is the result of repression, or denial of erotic feelings towards women. The text itself provides us with ample reasons for the ambiguity surrounding Layal's

sexuality. We learn from her that her male partner is overseas and that she misses him occasionally; however, she also displays active repression of her homoerotic feelings, for instance, when Meemee attempts to seduce Layal over dinner by wearing a "transparent dress underneath which she wore very small briefs"(110). When Meemee rubs herself against Layal we are told that "Layal's body quivered at this contact but she kindly pushed Meemee away from her" (112). Afterwards, when Layal is invited into the lounge room for coffee after the dinner is over, she briefly soliloquises: "God, I hope we get through this night in peace. Meemee is very beautiful" (113). At the evening's end Meemee requests an embrace and the following description is to be found in the text:

> They adhered to each other in this fashion for some time. Layal felt the warmth of Meemee's body, her senses awakened and she almost…. But she withdrew from Meemee's arms and said: "Let's get some sleep" (114).

Later in the novel Layal is invited to one of Meemee's "ladies-only" parties, and she arrives in true Cinderella fashion with everyone falling silent at her entrance. As the evening progresses, the following event takes place (after Meemee's girlfriend makes a great many protestations against Meemee's ostentatious advances on Layal):

> She drew near Layal, took her by the hand and pressed her body against hers and they began to dance. Layal's body awakened and she embraced Meemee intensely and kissed her. Meemee had begun to relax in her arms when the old hag came to drag her to herself. Layal returned to her seat indignantly but when she sat down she began to observe the scene before her: kisses and performances that were quite arousing (128).

After this, Layal leaves, having demonstrated some signs of indignation (one would think for having been interrupted), and she remarks:

> "I don't want to understand." She removed from her head and memory everything that she saw moments earlier and attempted to return to her writing and work. She missed her boyfriend…. "Should I call him? He's abroad and won't satisfy my alert body. No I won't call anyone" (129).

A paragraph later she decides that she will call someone, her friend Raya who teaches psychology at university, and we learn shortly after this that she and Raya share an ambiguous mutual "admiration" for each other that never once "crossed that boundary" (130) of mutual admiration. The most significant reference to Layal's possible process of repression takes place when she is driving Meemee to a restaurant towards the end of the narrative. She was, of course, cornered by Meemee into doing this and wonders whether it was "her curiosity that dragged her into this kind of behaviour [....or whether] there was a Don Juanina inclination that spurred her on into doing what she was doing" (149). Unfortunately for us, and quite characteristically for Layal, she stops short of the ultimate discovery. "She did not complete these thoughts because they arrived at the restaurant" (149). It is peculiar that Layal fails to continue these thoughts at a later point in the novel, and yet it is also intriguing. Her sexuality is left in a position of fluidity, escaping categorisation through its instability. The character's sexuality is never fully revealed to her and neither is it to the reader.

Interestingly, while the narrative relies on omissions to relate Layal's erotic interactions with Meemee, her relationship with Siham is not at all ambiguous. The important distinction between Meemee and Siham is that the latter is a young and impressionable undergraduate whilst the other is a voluptuous woman well into her adulthood and in full possession of skills of seduction.

While *I Am You* might *seem* like a superficial novel, which is ill-written as the scathing reviews have claimed, it is invested in various academic discourses at once; the

philosophical and the psychological, the literary as well as the (culturally) historical. Mansour's novel is the first of its kind, as a novel about a lesbian protagonist, whose suffering might initially appear incidental, trivial and unworthy in light of the atrocities of war which surround it. But Siham's pain is shared by innumerable beings, whose desire for inclusion in society competes heavily with their desire to live out fulfilling romantic and erotic lives. As psychological studies have shown, contact with individuals who identify as homosexual (whether in real life or through film and literature) has a tendency greatly to reduce hostile feelings towards homosexuality as a malignant entity. In addition, the proliferation of positive, or at least realistic, representations of individuals of deviant sexuality and gender, assists those individuals in *coming to terms* with their own sexual identities. *I Am You*'s triumph is in its audacity to name the nameless and to dismiss heavy-handedly centuries of orthodox traditions and cultural complacency as regards variant sexual orientations.

Lebanon is presently the only Arab-speaking country within which a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered civil rights organisation has been formed. The Lebanese GLBT group Helm (which means Dream) has been recently created. Although, to my knowledge, no actual activism has yet taken place, their website now documents the Gay and Lesbian underworld, which homosexual men and women frequent in the form of nightclubs, restaurants, bathhouses, cinemas and cruises.[44] The first Arabic-language Gay and Lesbian magazine, *Barra* (which means *Outside*), is now being printed and distributed in Lebanon, among university students in particular.[45] The situation remains far from ideal for homosexual and transgendered individuals living in Lebanon, but those individuals who share much of their adolescent and young adult despair with

Siham, eventually outgrow the social mythology drilled into them by society, and they learn to accept themselves and to find happiness within the limitations of their environment. Not all of them of course.

I Am You does not present us with a happy, well-adjusted lesbian heroine, instead, it presents a young woman's struggle to understand herself and it bespeaks of her torment and her poetic catharsis in the form of a near psychotic obsession with an unattainable (and unsuitable) woman. But this is not a failing on the part of Mansour, as the novel resists becoming another (stereotypical) instance of a literary, tormented homosexual anti-hero—because the torment the author inscribes does indeed exist and it reflects a reality shared by people who are unnecessarily oppressed in their societies. A happy, well-adjusted heroine will emerge in time, and her politics will be better articulated because she will be writing *for* herself and *about* herself, and, who knows, this very heroine might be the project (or producer) of the second Arabic lesbian-centred novel ever written—a novel which we still await, five years on from *I Am You*'s publication.

Notes

[1] Elham Mansour, *Ana Hiya Anti* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2000), 93-94. All translations are mine and are taken from a complete and as yet unpublished translation of the novel, entitled *I Am You*. Present and subsequent in-text page numbers refer to the Arabic edition cited above.

[2] I refer to *I Am You* as the first "lesbian-centred" novel because the entire novel is dedicated particularly to the subject of female homosexuality. Other Arab writers of fiction have depicted homoerotic relations among women, but have treated sexual relationships between women as a side-effect of poor relations between men and women in patriarchal societies. Nawal Sadawi's novel *Janat Wa Iblis* (Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1992) deals briefly and obscurely with the subject, particularly in the chapter entitled "Al Hub Al Athim" ("Sinful Love") 117-137; Hannan Al Sheik's *Misk Al Ghasal* (Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1988) depicts a sexual relationship between two married women living with their husbands in an unnamed Arab Gulf country. The relationship between Suha and Nour spans the first two volumes of the novel and is intended to depict a critique of Arab societies' alienation of women from men. Two other novelists, Ghada Al-Saman and Samiah Kahluni have written about female homosexuality in their stories *Al-Muwa'a* and *Layinat Al-Malamiss* (respectively). Unfortunately I have not yet been able to procure these texts and although I know of their existence I eagerly await the opportunity to locate and critique them. An impediment to the discovery of these texts has been their fade into obscurity. Although both Kahluni and Saman are prominent feminist Arab writers, significant reference to these stories and any bibliographical

information has been impossible to find. I am indebted to Moody Bittar for referring to these works in "Kira'a Fi Tiwayat Elham Mansour 'Ana Hiya Anti'" (*Alhayat*, 14 Oct., 2000, 15).
[3] With thanks to the Lesbian Herstory Archives' 1950s lesbian pulp fiction collection viewed in Brooklyn, New York, in November 2004. I am also indebted to M. McClarnon and Sally Bingham's internet collection of *Lesbian Pulp Fiction:* http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/women/pulp.html (12.1.05)
[4] A list of Bannon's lesbian-positive novels can be viewed at http://www.annbannon.com/books.html (06.06.2005). See also Diane Hamer's "'I Am a Woman:' Ann Bannon and the writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s" in M. Lilly, ed., *Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 47-75.
[5] Examples of pseudo-intellectual studies of female homosexuality in Arabic include Khatib Al Adnani's "Al-Suhaq Aw Al-Jins Al-Thalith" in *Al-Zina Wal Shuthooth Fi Al-Tarikh Al-Arabi* (London and Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company, 1999) 189-202, and Muntasir Muthhir's *Al-Muta'a Al-Muharama: Al-liwat Wal Suhaq Fi Al-Tarikh Al-Arabi* (n.c: Dar Al-Alamiya, 2001).
[6] Through oral communication with Dr Elham Mansour, August 2003.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Jihad, "Hiwar Ma Al-Doctora Elham Mansour Hawl Riwayatuha Al-Jadida 'Ana Hiya Anti'" (*Al Hawadeth*, 8 Sept., 2000), 58, translation mine.
[9] The reception of *I Am You* reminds us of the critical appraisal of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* upon its publication in England in 1928. On this subject Lisa Walker writes that "[n]ot without cause, Hall's writing has been called dull, over-wrought, melodramatic, maudlin, old-fashioned and stilted, and *The Well* is often regarded as pioneering for its open representation of lesbianism rather than for its literary achievements." See her *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 22.
[10] Pierre Shalhoob, "Atash Ila Al-Mustaheel!" (*A-Naqid*, 7-17 Aug., 2000), 33, translation mine.
[11] Qasim Nouri Abood, "Ightiyal Al-Riwaya" (*A-Naqid*, 2-25 Oct.,. 2000), 32, translation mine.
[12] Yassin Rafa'aiya, "Khiyanat Al-Fan" (*A-Naqid*, 11-22 Sept., 2000), 31, translation mine.
[13] Amina Ghusun, "Elham Mansour Fi Ana Hiya Anti: Ma Jadwa Riwaya Talhaq Al Ifti'al Wal-Fadiha?" (*Alhayat*, 18 Aug., 2000), 13, translation mine.
[14] Moodie Bittar, "Kira'a Fi Riwayat Elham Mansour 'Ana Hiya Anti'" (*Alhayat*, 14 Oct., 2000), 15, translation mine.
[15] Yassin Rafa'aiya, "Khiyanat Al-Fan" 31, translation mine.
[16] Maree Qaseefee, "Ana Hiya Anti Li Elham Mansour: Taqrrera wa Mubashara Fi Tashrreeh 'Alam Al-Mara' Al-Sirri" (*An-Nahar*, 2 Aug., 2000, n.p.), translation mine.
[17] The independent American film, *But I'm A Cheerleader* (dir. J. Babbit, Lions Gate Entertainment, 1999) comically presents this as the concept of the "root." In a camp for teenagers that converts homosexuals into ex-homosexuals by teaching them "true" gender distinctions and roles, the "patients" are invited to discover the event which *caused* their homosexuality. The film is satirical in its take, as one young lady comments that she is gay because she was born in France, another that it was because her mother "got married in pants," while a young man claims that it was "varsity wrestling" that did it—all examples leading to the absurdity of the question rather than simply to the absurdity of the answers themselves.
[18] Zeena Bizzie, [Interview with Elham Mansour] in *Al-Kifah Al-Arabi*, 18 Oct., 2000, 14.
[19] Mansour's experimentalism with language was noted and closely explored in Michelle Hartman's "Ilham Mansur's *Ila Hiba: sira ula and Hiba fi rihlat al-jasad: sira thaniyya*" (*Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 2.2, 1999, 141-158). Hartman notes Mansour's use of English and French words within her conversational Arabic narrative style and ponders the significance of this. In *Ana Hiya Anti* Mansour continues this technique of supplementing Arabic words with English or French terms. For example, she uses the term "homosexualité" (93); the term "gay" appears several times (see 170-173); "garçon manqué" (11); "la bisexualité" (173); and the peculiar use of the word "fuck" (166). Hartman asserts that Mansour uses European language terms in her writing because they do not have their equivalent in Arabic. In the case of *Ana Hiya Anti*, however, with the exception of the term "gay" which is particularly western, the above terms all have their equivalent (homosexuality: *Mithliya*; garçon manqué: *Hassan Sabi*; bisexuality: *Isdiwaj Al-Jinsiya* and fuck: *Neek* or *Nayk*). In this instance Mansour may be reflecting the reality of integrated Lebanese-Arabic speech, which cannot be divorced from the imperialist (through globalisation) and colonial nations which have influenced and shaped this culture, particularly among the educated.

[20] Mansour is referring to the notion of love as discussed by Aristophanes and penned by Plato in *The Symposium*, where, as the tale goes, humans were originally eight-limbed creatures who were bisected by Zeus (for their insubordination). Love, Aristophanes explains, is the urge of the one half to be re-united with its other half. Initially, he says, there were three sexes, not two: male, female and the hermaphrodite and thus those "men who are halves of a being of the common sex, which was called… hermaphrodite, are lovers of women, and most adulterers come from this class, as also do women who are mad about men…. Women who are halves of a female whole direct their affections towards women and pay little attention to men; Lesbians [sic] belong to this category." See Plato's *The Symposium*, trans. W. Hamilton (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), 62. For Mansour, it is not the myth of the eight-limbed creatures which is of interest, but the notion that humans, in love, search for one who is *like* and *of* them, even though it appears as though humans are attracted by each other's differences.
[21] See interview with Mansour by Jihad, "Hiwar," 58.
[22] This is not to say in the least that love itself manifests itself singularly, but here, the notion of love that is conjured up is particularly platonic and love comes to mean that particular emotion which is entirely divine, affirmative and beautiful, therefore good. See *The Symposium*, 45-46.
[23] Jihad, "Hiwar," 58; see also Bizzie, [Interview with Elham Mansour], 14.
[24] Haneen Ghadar, "Al-Jins Fi Riwayat Arabiya: Al-Mara'a Mithlama Yarghabuha Al-Rajul"(*Al-Mulhaq*, 10 Feb, 2001), 7, translation mine.
[25] George Tarad, "…Yaqra'a Kamilan" (*A-Naqid*, 19-21 Aug., 2000), 31, translation mine.
[26] Hasan Abd Allah, "Ila Elham Mansour" (*A-Naqid*, 11-15 Dec., 2000), 35, translation mine.
[27] Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 77.
[28] Nuray Sakalli and Ozanser Uğurlu, "The Effects of Social Contact with a Lesbian Person on the Attitude Change Toward Homosexuality in Turkey" (*Journal of Homosexuality* 44.1, 2002), 111.
[29] Ibid., 117.
[30] Michelle A. Mazur and Tara M. Emmers-Sommer, "The Effect of Movie Portrayals on Audience Attitudes About Nontraditional Families and Sexual Orientation" (*Journal of Homosexuality* 44.1, 2002), 157.
[31] Ibid., 157; see also the more recent study by Paul Van de Ven, "Effects on High School Students of a Teaching Module for Reducing Homophobia" (*Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 17.1&2, 1995), 153-172.
[32] Anon., "Lebanon" *CIA World Fact Book*, http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/le.html (02.06.05)
[33] Incidentally and ironically, it was the Lebanese Christian militias which requested the presence of the Syrian army to quash the allied Lebanese and Palestinian militias. Eventually the Syrian army was of no use but also failed to leave; Syrian presence in Lebanon continued well beyond the end of the civil war in 1990. The assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 gained the sympathies of the international community, and the USA was able to apply pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops in the following month of the same year.
[34] Miriam Cooke, "Beirut: Rebron: The Political Aesthetics of auto-destruction" (*Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2, 2002), 403-404.
[35] Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 19.
[36] See Elham Mansour, *Hina Kuntu Rajulan* (Beirut: Riad El Rayyes, 2002), 187.
[37] Mansour's notion of the "feminine discourse" is a hybrid of feminist discourse and feminine ideals. She perceives that old-school feminist ideals (particularly in the Middle East) strive to emulate male-centred and patriarchal discourse. In her interview with Bizzie, Mansour asserts that "there is a lot of women's writing but most of it is written within a male-centred framework, even if it may appear revolutionary. Woman's discourse [i.e feminist discourse] is not self-aware and it adopts the same values, senses and sensations that are adopted by the man. The woman has not established a sensory, intuitive or reactionary basis for her own personal speech, because she is suffering from some sort of denial of her herself…. All the feminist movements in the world are attempting to turn women into men and to adopt the values held by men, thus jettisoning femininity altogether" (14, translation mine). I suspect that by "world" Mansour is referring to the Arab world (and is deliberately overlooking the French Feminist School with which she is familiar). In her interview with Michel Maeekie, Mansour reasserts this notion, that a feminist (and *feminine*) discourse, distinct from male (and masculine) discourse, desperately needs to be established. She

remarks that "what I am striving towards is equality based on difference. Man and woman are different, but this does not eliminate the fact that they are entitled to equal rights…. Feminist movements have failed because they attempted to transform women into men." See Michel Maeekie, "Elham Mansour An Riwayatuha Al-Jadida 'Ana Hiya Anti'" (*Al-Hiwar: Thakafa*, 28 Oct.,2000, n.p., translation mine).

[38] See Evelyn Accad's "Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women," in *Sexuality and War*, 11-38.

[39] This patriarchal taxonomy is discussed by Layal and Siham in the novel. Siham claims that when a man "possesses a woman's body…[he] strips her of her love for herself and takes her, consenting or forced, so that he could empty what is inside her of energy" (167). Even Meemee seems to register this inequality in the heterosexual act (apologies for the generalisation) when she states that men use "us as receptacles for receiving their filth" (143). Nawal Sadawi has discussed this concept in "Al-Rajul Wal Sadia" ("Man and Sadism") in *Al-Rajul Wal Jins*, 127-160.

[40] The possibility of a butch-femme dyad forming a powerful feminist subject position has been discussed in texts such as Sue-Ellen Case's "Towards a Butch Femme Aesthetic" (*Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 11.1, 1988-1989, 55-73), while writers such as Cherrie Moraga, Amber Hollibaugh and Joan Nestle in "The Fem Question" (1984) resignify lesbian femininity from passivity into an active subject position. See Cherie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh's "What We're Rollin' around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism" in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (London: Virago Press, 1984), 404-414; and Joan Nestle's "The Fem Question" in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: London, 1984), 232-241.

[41] Atel Adnan, "Growing up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon (1986)" in M. Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 7.

[42] Communication with Elham Mansour.

[43] Conflation of transgenderism and homosexuality is very common in societies where homosexuality is forbidden. This follows from the basic premise about sexuality and gender, that men are necessarily masculine and desire women, whilst women are feminine and necessarily desire men. Women who desire other women are therefore either seen as men or aspiring to be men.

[44] See http://beirut.helem.net/index.htm (20.06.2005).

[45] See http://www.helem.net/barra.htm (20.06.2005).