



## Narrating Homosexuality across Borders and Beyond Boundaries in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001)

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**Abstract**

The present paper examines Hanan al-Shaykh's interrogations of homosexuality across borders and beyond the boundaries of East and West in 'Only in London' (2001), a diasporic novel with a Lebanese homosexual protagonist, Samir. It analyzes the ways in which the heterosexual, social, and power networks established to ostensibly force Samir's homosexuality into the closet work to eliminate the existence of homosexuality as an independent identity in Arab society. Drawing on Michael Foucault's framework of sexuality and biopolitical analysis, the paper negotiates the depiction of mental hospital scenes, the medicalization of Samir's homosexuality, and the social pathologization of his alternative gender and sexuality as instruments of "biopolitics of the population" designed to lock homosexuality into a "pathological phenomenon", which has to be medicalized in order to conform to homonormative mainstream culture. It demonstrates how through the mechanisms of biopower, and techniques of surveillance of bodies, Samir's homosexuality is turned into an object of intense observation, study, and power relations. It maintains that the pathologizing psychiatric discourse, the heterosexual institution of marriage, Samir's family, and the state are all complicit with the heteropatriarchal taxonomies of sexuality. The paper further illustrates how being Arab, an immigrant, and a homosexual in London complicate Samir's existence as an alien homosexual being in exile.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The culture wars over "coming out of the closet" faced with the incrimination of non-normative sexuality and alternative gender identities in the Middle East have been the object of a deeply politicized contention from the early Islamic, medieval, pre-modern Arab world, to the present day Arab cultural debates. The intensity of the controversy aggravates whenever individuals claim their right to articulate their non-normative sexual identities outside the heterosexual orthodoxy of their highly restrictive and heteropatriarchal cultures. The religious precepts, the conservative gender dynamics often linked to them, and the perception of homosexuality as an alien globalized queer ideology have all sharpened the dispute over the hetero-homo binarization, categorization, and regulation of sexual identities in the Arab world. Their authority, as Dalacoura (2014) maintains, "is shored up by the call to protect an 'authentic' culture which, *if ever existed*, has long ago been wiped out" (emphasis added, p.129).

Hence, destined to endure the trauma of censorship, invisibility, and silence, individuals with alternative sexualities are constantly persecuted for their sexual orientation and prohibited from expressing their non-normative subjectivities in their own societies which are hostile to their sexual fluidity and difference. As a result, they are expected and demanded to conform to mainstream social norms and values at the expense of their sexual differences and desires. Any deviation from the heteropatriarchal established order is subjected to disciplinary regimes of sexuality often embodied by medical scrutiny and psychiatric pathology. Put differently, modern pathologizing psychiatric discourse, being complicit with heteropatriarchal taxonomies of sexuality, has served throughout history as "regulatory controls", referred to by Foucault (1978) as "a bio-politics of the population" (p.139), which he defines as "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (p.140). Generally regarded as a threat to the social fabric of heterosexual societies, homosexual bodies and identities are, therefore, unacknowledged, excluded, and constantly subjected to psychiatric therapy as a way to normalize and institutionalize the moral conduct of mainstream heterosexual discourse. In consequence, by describing homosexuality as a mental disorder and disease that should be cured and eliminated, the medicalization of homosexuality continues to heterosexualize non-heterosexuals and instruct them in homophobia. Added to this, the fear of moral degradation, degeneration, and passive Arab masculinity often associated with coming out of the closet have forced homosexuals to live in shame, silence, and secrecy. The resulting discourse, therefore, is one of repression and prohibition.

Nonetheless, despite the various disciplinary and exclusionary power structures that seek to forge silence, invisibility, and submission, homosexual subjectivities, bodies, and sexualities are voiced out through various mediums of critical thought, thereby problematizing our modern understanding of the binary constructs of homosexuality and heterosexuality. In particular, literature has been the locus wherein the dualities of "homosexual"/"heterosexual", "normal"/"abnormal", and "sane"/"insane" are constantly contested and negotiated. Explicit homoerotic desires and dissident narratives of alternative sexuality find their echoes in contemporary Arab homoerotic literature. The latter problematizes the canonized discourses into which the narrative of homosexuality locks itself, and ultimately opens up new avenues of thought and action for homosexual individuals to reclaim their narratives and speak their anti-heterosexual desires, bodies, and identities. Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Only in London*, which is the text under study, brings up the thorny issue of homosexuality into negotiation, demonstrating how literature can be used as a counter-hegemonic instrument of resistance against the canonized structures and exclusionary practices of heterosexism and homophobic ethno-nationalism. In so doing, it allows a space where homosexual bodies and identities can transcend the forbidden, the prescribed, and the established epistemological boundaries and authorial constructions of homosexuality.

This paper is an attempt to examine how the complexities and representations of homosexuality and homosexual subjectivities are thematized, contested, and negotiated in contemporary diasporic literature. In particular, narrated from the in-between space of diaspora, the study focuses on how homosexual subjectivities are stigmatized, alienated, and pathologized both in the Arab world and in exile. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to studying the controversial and multidimensional theme of homosexuality, this study is informed by postcolonial, postmodern, and diaspora critical insights. In so doing, it seeks to disrupt the normative essentialist codifications and regulations of homosexuality in both Arab conservative ideology and modern Western discourse. It maintains that rather than being contained merely within the confines of behavioural or psychological constructs and entities, homosexuality and homosexual identities are, in fact, plagued with heterosexual moralistic righteousness and homophobic ethno-nationalist agendas.

## 2. Coming Out of the Closet: Intricacies of Ostracism, Power, and Subjugation

Branded as "one of the most liberal, taboo-breaking Arab women writers of her generation" (El-Enany, 2006, p.194), the Lebanese postcolonial feminist writer, Hanan al-Shaykh has devoted her entire life to dissident writing negotiating, in the process, the dominant power dynamics of erasure, heteronormativity, body, and sexuality in mainstream Arab cultures. Born in 1945 in Lebanon, al-Shaykh was raised in a religiously Shiite conservative family typified by Middle Eastern traditions in which sex, religion, and non-normative practices are considered taboo, shameful, and decadent. In 1975, al-Shaykh left her home country, Lebanon, to escape the civil war to Saudi Arabia and then to London where she ended up living to the present. Except for her latest English-language novel, *The Occasional Virgin*, all of al-Shaykh's fiction is rooted in Arabic and recounts stories of men and women in the Arab world as they struggle to reclaim their narratives and speak their own identities in societies that are hostile to their sense of fluidity, sexual agency, and transformation. Being the author of ten novels, a book of short stories, and two plays, al-Shaykh is among the most highly influential and well-known female Arab writers and feminist activists whose works have been translated into twenty-eight languages from their original Arabic language source (El Geressi, 2018, n.p.). However, because of her highly critical attitude toward the heteropatriarchal mainstream culture in the Arab world, al-Shaykh's fiction was judged as "lewd" and "uproarious", and so was "initially banned in many Arab countries" (Short, 2019, n.p.). One of her earlier works, *The Story of Zahra*, for instance, was banned in Lebanon, and al-Shaykh was forced to publish it at her own cost. However, as a non-conformist intellectual, al-Shaykh refuses to adhere to the prescribed and expected conventions of Arab women's writing, and vehemently objects to being a prisoner of dogmas of rigid ideologies, and societal restrictions. Even though she does not erase her identity as a "Shiite Muslim" she expresses her distaste for patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic faith and culture in the Arab world. She says: "It is not that I have an issue with Islam, I am Muslim after all, but as a woman, I have always been about being accepted for who you are and for progress and freedom across faiths. I have to be frank," (Short, 2019, n.p.). Her anti-teleological, anti-essentialist and anti-heteronormative narratives are an attempt to unsettle the hegemonic forces that seek to muffle Arab gendered voices, restrict their corporeal mobilities, and deny their multiple sexual agencies. As currently a migrant writer living in the diaspora, al-Shaykh has devoted her transnational fiction to negotiating the dynamics of identity, culture, sexuality, power, alienation, and displacement both in her respective homeland culture and in exile simultaneously. Oscillating between the two worlds of home and diaspora, the author and her protagonists are therefore engaged in a process of "double critique": a critique of Western and Arabo-Islamic heteronormative discourses and cultural orthodoxies.

Geographically located in the diasporic setting of London, al-Shaykh's *Only in London* (published in Arabic as *Innaha London ya Azizi*), the novel under study, narrates the story of three Arab immigrants who have struggled to free themselves from the dominant entanglements of patriarchy, seeking an alternative meaning for their own subjectivities and sexualities at the liminal seams of diaspora: two women – Amira, a young Moroccan prostitute who flees her homeland searching for a new sense of becoming elsewhere, Lamis, a new divorcee from an oppressive marriage to a rich older Iraqi whom she is coerced to wed in an arranged marriage in order to save her family from the abject of poverty, and finally Samir, the Lebanese homosexual from Beirut, undertakes multiple journeys from Lebanon to Dubai to London where he longs for a possibility to live out his homosexual identity without restrictions and taboos. Each character is carefully chosen to act out the role anticipated by the writer who, through her fictional characters, seeks to problematize, revisit, and celebrate the gendered subaltern voices against the power of social hierarchy, authority, and rigidity. All the three characters escape their homelands to end up in London where they aspire to reinvent themselves and reclaim their own narratives. As we follow the three protagonists' journeys from the East to the West, we become aware that identity can be anything one desires

oneself to be, and that mobility, as an act of resistance to geographical and cultural definitions of belonging, moves us away from the continuous to the discontinuous conception of identity. In addition, by employing the flashback technique, thus oscillating between past and present, home and exile, the novel offers insights into each of the characters' traumatic experiences of being and becoming. That the novel makes frequent flashbacks moving between the life of Samir between past and present, East and West also breaks the traditional linear form of narrative, and adopts instead a non-linear, quasi-stream of consciousness style, which distorts the notions of time and space, and subverts as well the linear ways of the conventional understanding of Arab identity and sexuality.

Limiting the scope of this study to the controversial theme of homosexuality, the analysis focuses on the homosexual character, Samir, undergoing a tragic life in his home country because of his homosexual identity. Then, it moves on to negotiate representations of homosexuality at the periphery of the Western metropolis, in between London and Beirut, unveiling, in the process, the ways in which homosexual identity is caught between social repression and ethno-racial exclusion in the social orthodoxies of both Europe and the Arab world.

Born into a Shiite family, the protagonist was brought up under the authority of his religious father and his complicit mother and aunt. As such, Samir must contend with the conflict between his desire to come out of the closet, and the force of heteronormative social conventions that repress his fluid sense of body and sexuality. At the outset, the novel displays the homosexual body as a form of deviant sexuality through which hetero-normative prescriptions of sexuality and masculinity are contested and negotiated. Noteworthy, while the narrative seems to provide a space for acknowledging the fluidity, complexity, and variability inherent in human beings, it also explores the miserable life of a young gay and his tragic experiences as a homosexual Arab man who grows up immigrating from one country to another in the Middle East, before finally settling in London looking for ways to live out his dreamy sense of selfhood away from family ostracism and societal reprisals forced upon him in his homeland.

The novel introduces Samir, a transvestite and closeted homosexual, growing up in a socio-sexual context where expressions of non-normative, marginal, or transgressive sexualities are perceived as "threats" to heteropatriarchal definitions of sexuality and gender. In other words, because sexual practices in Arab cultures have been restricted to maintaining a social order that does not defy the heterosexual institution of marriage, the presumed fluidity of Arab sexuality is constantly subjected to regulatory and disciplinary structures in order to conform to society's moral conduct of heterosexuality. Samir is painfully aware that his growing sense of his fluid body and sexuality would inevitably bring him and his desires into conflict with his society represented initially by his own family. The latter, being complicit with the heteronormative discourse of nationalism, culture, and religion, works as an ideological apparatus entitled to preserve the heteronationalist order of the nation-state. Foucault (2006) puts it clear that "confinement and the whole police structure that surrounded it served to control a certain order in family structures, which was at once a social regulator and a norm of reason. Family and its requirements became one of the essential criteria of reason, and it was above all in its name that confinement was demanded and obtained." (p.89). Building on Althusser's theory of the "Ideological State Apparatuses", Zak (2002) corroborates a similar contention writing that modern ideological apparatuses represented by family and other institutions "provide the justification and explanation to the rituals of power, socialize individuals personally and directly, create subjective consciousness, enable individuals to identify with the subject identity created by the power system, and finally they give moral and emotional meanings to individuals' experiences as real, authentic individually unique and appropriate." (p.223)



As Samir's life unfolds, his perception of homosexuality begins to take shape in his mind before it becomes a thought to be lived out. To his frustration, however, when he first attempts to transcend the heterosexual norm prescribed to him by his male-led society, he is confronted with social disciplinary and punitive power regulations that prohibit defiant forms of sexuality to come out. When he exposes girlish traits in his early childhood, which have a clear link with effeminacy, his family scolds him forcing him to perform tasks assigned to the male role in Arab society, thus obliterating his non-normative desires to flourish. The narrator tells us how his aunt used to "hit him and say "Walk straight. Don't swing your hips" (93). At this stage, Samir realizes that coming out of his closet within his family is not an easy process. He, therefore, resorts to secrecy in order to exercise his sense of transvestite identity. In his bedroom, Samir cross-dresses, puts on make-up, and enjoys his internal sense of emasculation as his ultimate goal of feminine desire. As he becomes convinced about his sexual orientation, which shapes his being and childhood, he perceives himself as a different type of person from those around him. Nonetheless, his position as a homosexual character in a mainstream heterosexual culture complicates his transition into an independent homosexual identity, and henceforth will not be allowed to inhabit a neutral androgynous space than that of heterosexuality. Thus, his attempt to assert his homosexual identity within such an oppressive and subtle socio-political structure requires him to rebel against the authority of heterosexual norms in order to sustain his sexual agency. In other words, Samir refuses to adhere to male-gendered dictations and performances and instead prefers to come to terms with his body and gender identity. He, therefore, decides to transgress the boundaries of secrecy, invisibility, and silence imposed on him in order to declare his sense of sexual fluidity. When he decides to publicly confess his homosexual identity and come out to his family, he cross-dresses and gets out of his room. When his parents witness him cross-dressing on the rooftop of the house early in his life, they send him to a mental institution. The narrator informs us that when Samir's mother,

had caught him singing and dancing on the roof terrace wearing her blue nylon nightie, her lipstick and high heels ... she called her husband . . . and edged away from her son, scared that he would throw himself off the rooftop if she went closer. Her crazy relative had jumped off a rooftop. Mad people hated anyone touching them when they were having one of their fits" (p. 150).

At this juncture, Samir's cross-dressing registers the beginning of not only his confession of his homosexual identity but also marks a turning point in his life. Samir, however, refuses to adhere to male-gendered dictations and performances, and instead prefers to come to terms with his body and gender identity. When he feels he is controlled and surveilled by members of his family, he resorts again to performing femininity secretly in his own room. Samir's homosexuality, then, becomes a threat to the demoralized male Arab identity for which he must be confined to shame, defilement, and pain. He partakes in masculine roles only under coercion, and he thereby attempts to produce himself as a "female" subject in order to gain control over his body and his activities. This of course cannot happen, because as Judith Butler (1993) suggests in her theory of "citational performativity", in order for one to be intelligible and qualify as a viable subject in society, one must perform the "correct" gender identity (p.232). All other alternative gender performances, as a result, are associated with unintelligibility, immorality and degeneration. In other words, one can only be heterosexual or be excluded from the mainstream culture and society.

As Samir's homosexual desires and gender slips grow uncontrollably, his family's anxiety aggravates and as a result, his predicament around his sexual subjectivity intensifies. To regulate his homosexual activities and tendencies, his family takes him to a hospital in order to "heal" his non-normative behavior. Unable to live under such disciplinary structures, he attempts to commit suicide as an act of resistance against the social power structures that

force him to stifle his sexual identity. Yet, because of his growing dissidence, Samir is taken this time to a mental institution implying that his homosexual symptoms are a result of a mental disorder and madness that should be psychologically medicalized and treated. However, the imagery of the psychiatric hospital is very telling in this regard. Both the state (represented here by the mental hospital) and the family work hand in hand to serve the heterosexual hegemonic discourse by exercising control on Samir's body in order to fit into the role of the prescribed masculine gender identity, thus unveiling the extent to which Samir's homosexual identity was suppressed and subjected to social, medical, and political disciplining power structures. According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is the "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Gramsci, 1989, p.118). To regulate and heterosexualize individuals' sexualities, the traditional hegemonic authorities (state, family, and mental institution) prohibit sexual fluidity and deny Samir's existence as a homosexual being.

Foucault's discourse on sexuality is compatible with Gramsci's concept of hegemony in many respects and is therefore pertinent to the analysis of the subjugation, medicalization and pathologization of Samir's homosexuality. For him, sexuality is first and foremost a manifestation of power and dominion (1978). He postulates that power has been exercised when homosexuality is regarded as the object of medical study, when it becomes the subject of examination and medical morality, and when it is subjected to the power and knowledge of psychiatry. It is in this way that power becomes normalized and heteronormative discourse is therefore institutionalized. In an interview with Jean Le Bitoux, Foucault declares that "once homosexuality became a medicopsychiatric category in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is striking to me that it was immediately analyzed and rendered intelligible in terms of hermaphroditism. That is how a homosexual, or that is the form in which the homosexual, enters into psychiatric medicine: the form of the hermaphrodite" (cited in Eribon, 2001, p.48). He concurs that medicine and psychiatry have produced the illusion of scientific knowledge, which ultimately claims the truth of distinguishing between "reason" and "unreason", "good" and "bad", and between "normal" and "abnormal" sexuality. Put in other terms, Foucault reveals that psychiatry has not only designated homosexuality as a mental pathology but also as a form of "insanity" and "madness", for he argues that

In the light of its own naivety, psychoanalysis understood that all forms of madness have roots in troubled sexuality; but to say that is to do little more than note that our culture, [...] placed sexuality on the dividing line of unreason. Since time immemorial, and probably in all cultures, sexuality has been governed by systems of constraint; but it is a comparatively recent particularity of our own culture to have divided it so rigorously into Reason and Unreason. As a consequence and degradation of that, it was not long before it was also classified into healthy or sick, normal or abnormal. (Foucault, 2006, p. 88-89).

In their examination of homosexuality as a "sickness", psychiatry and psychoanalysis bring homosexual individuals under the control of the medical gaze, thus relegating them to those who are lacking reason and are prone to mental disorders. According to this medical discourse, "homosexuality" is a coinage associated with abnormality and debauchery. Foucault pinpoints that homosexuals who previously had been perceived as "libertines" or "delinquents", are in the discourse of medicine, seen as having "a global kinship with the insane", due to their "suffering from a sickness of the sexual instinct" (Eribon, 2004, p.282). He claims that both the homosexual and the insane were viewed as being "ill" because of their non-normative sexual orientations:

The psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault, 1978, p.43)

As such, medicine's intervention in individual lives serves as an instrument of power and as a disciplinary mechanism intended to thwart the emergence of alternative forms of sexuality deemed pathological or non-normative. Foucault maintains that the moment when homosexuality enters psychiatric medicine, "the technology of sex was essentially ordered in relation to the medical institution, the exigency of normality, and instead of the question of death and the everlasting punishment—the problem of life and illness" (p.117). As a consequence of the medical invention of a society of normality, legal codes were thus substituted and replaced by socio-moral regulations. Foucault posits that "doctors are in the process of inventing a society, not of law, but of the norm. What governs society are not legal codes but the perpetual distinction between normal and abnormal, a perpetual enterprise of restoring the system of normality" (Foucault, 2004, p.13). By doing so, medicine not only gained access to the minds and bodies of homosexuals, but also functions as a bio-political intervention by constructing homosexuality as epistemologically an object of knowledge and a locus of truth.

As such, medicine's intervention in individual lives serves as an instrument of power and

The hospitalization of Samir coupled with the disciplining structures of both family and mental institution as narrated in *Only in London* evoke and confirm Foucault's insights on power and sexuality in the sense that both family and the mental institution represent in this case the repressive heteropatriarchal apparatuses that work to stifle Samir's homosexual identity by rendering it as deviant and as a threat to the codes of heteronormative social standards. In this way, both the mental hospital and the family are at the service of a violent and corrupt patriarchal power, which seeks to restore its legitimacy by erasing Samir's transvestite identity, thereby construing his homosexuality as an illness that requires treatment and elimination. Furthermore, the fact that Samir's homosexuality is considered a "pathological phenomenon" and, as such, he is hospitalized and taken to a mental institution reveals how he is ostracized and exteriorized from his family and society. Put differently, by associating Samir's homosexuality with a mental disorder, the novel exposes the complicity of family, hospitals, and the state with heteropatriarchy in their suppression and concealment of homosexuality in the Arab world.

Unfolding how binary categorization of social behavior into reason and unreason influences our perception of homosexuality, Foucault further concurs that little by little homosexuality "was forced to take its place in the stratifications of madness. For the modern age it was firmly inside unreason, placing within all sexuality an obligation to choose, through which our era constantly repeats its decision" (Foucault, 2006, p.88). This is because madness itself was not a natural reality, but a pathological construct emerged to draw distinctions between the "reasonable" and the "unreasonable", the "sane" and the "insane". Accordingly, since homosexuality is described and perceived in relation to madness, homosexuals are deemed to be "sinful", "guilty," and "unreasonable."

Foucault's insights on homosexuality, madness, and power find their echoes in Samir's predicament as a homosexual being in Lebanon, and as an Arab homosexual immigrant in London. When the latter ventures to come out of the closet, the narrator tells us "mad people hated anyone touching them when they were having one of their fits" (150). Referring to Samir as "mad" draws clear parallels with the association of homosexuality with madness, for which he is hospitalized for the third time. Samir's body, as a result, is objectified and becomes the

object of a medical study. Helpless as he is, he remains under the control of the doctor who represents and enforces in this context the conventional aspects against which Samir rebels. In other words, the doctor and the hospital institution epitomize the heteropatriarchal society's tendency to protect itself by separating the "abnormal", the "irrational", and the "insane" from the "familiar", the "rational", and the "sane". Samir, the patient and the objectified, is therefore supposed to submit to the psychotherapeutic process unquestioningly. In this case, the mental institution takes on a "corrective" and a punitive role aimed at correcting Samir's sexual behavior according to what society deems "normal" and "acceptable". We read how a nun at the hospital tries to persuade him to forbear from his homosexual tendencies by explaining to him in detail what distinguishes a woman from a man. When Samir seems not to be interested in her instructions, the woman warns him saying "it's not right for you to love a man" (237). To further convince him to disassociate himself from homosexuality, she tells him that he will not get married and have children while being homosexual, which is an attempt to force him to acknowledge his sexual desires only within the heterosexual institution of marriage. Samir, however, replies "I'm not going to have children" (237).

When deviant signs of his homosexuality resist the socio-sexual and political codifications of gender and sexuality in his patriarchal social milieu, Samir is ultimately institutionalized and forced into an arranged marriage, and fathered five children in Dubai. Similar to the mental institution disciplinary regulations, the heterosexual institution of marriage acquires the role of confining defiant bodies and sexualities into the normalized structures of heterosexual marriage in an attempt to deny the existence of the homosexual desire as an independent identity. In other words, because he is forcefully married off, Samir's homosexual subjectivity is compelled to be infused inside heterosexism that does not acknowledge alternative forms of sexuality. Therefore, all these disciplinary and regulatory operations that Samir is forced to go through while trying to inscribe himself as a speaking subject illustrate the suppression of fluid identities and sexualities in the Arab world and expose, in the process, the ways these disciplinary institutions control homosexual desires and bodies in a manner that maintains the primacy of heterosexism and homo-social order.

Seen from the lenses of postcolonial theory, however, the thorny issue of homosexuality cannot, in fact, be disassociated from the ongoing postcolonial project of decolonizing the mind, body and culture. Given that homosexuality has been perceived as merely a western "import", resisting its sweeping hegemony in the name of cultural "authenticity" and "purity" might have become mandatory for anti-cultural imperialism critics and conservatives in the Arab World. In other words, some would argue that opposition to homosexuality is a means to maintain cultural integrity and affirm authenticity. Drawing on Edward Said's approach and concepts as a basis for his interrogation of homosexuality, modernity, and the Middle East, Joseph Massad concurs that the West's intent to 'promote' homosexual rights is part and parcel of its hegemonic project through which rescue narratives, and binary discourses of the "civilized" and the "uncivilized", the "liberal" and the "atavistic" are deployed to serve Western political and imperial agendas. For him, "Gay Internationals", as he prefers to call it, is a form of Western cultural imperialism through which the West seeks to "save" Arab homosexual individuals from their "repressive" cultures:

By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary. Because most non-Western societies, including Muslim Arab societies, have not subscribed historically to these categories, their imposition is eliciting less than liberatory outcomes [...] most Arab and Muslim countries that do not have laws against sexual conduct between men respond to the Gay International's incitement to discourse by professing antihomosexual stances on a nationalist basis.... Those countries that already have unenforced laws begin to enforce them. Ironically,



this is the very process through which 'homosexuality' was invented in the West. (pp.188-189)

Massad is putting forth a critique of the imperial internationalization model of sexuality and the ways in which it is propagated in the Arab World, asserting the point that homosexuality is a particular cultural formation rather than a universal category. Based on Orientalist representations of alternative sexuality in the Orient as being invisible, repressed, and stifled, the globalized queer ideology advanced by Euro-American Orientalism and imperialism is deployed to "liberate Arab and Muslim 'gays and lesbians' from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual gay" (162). Following this argument, the gay identity, therefore, becomes not only a form of westernization, but also a symbol of recolonization. Hence, according to Massad, those who adopt universal identifications and binaries of homosexuality are wittingly or unwittingly complicit with the taxonomies of the imperial sexual regime. At one level, the universalization of homosexuality obscures the specificities of other cultures, and therefore the rejection of its universal discourse might explain the opposition to any form of sexual identity that is outside the "authentic" heterosexual cultural orthodoxies of the Middle East. As a result, it is no surprise that post-colonial nations have been highly hostile to globalized queer ideology because of its Western Orientalist origins and imperial internalization. To this respect, homosexuality is reckoned to be inauthentic, westernized and immoral. Therefore, standing against social and political decadence associated with western, colonial moral values in order to maintain social cohesion and integrity becomes the prevalent discourse through which suppression of alternative sexuality can be justifiable. In other words, it is this romanticizing of the concepts of "cohesion", "authenticity" and "integrity" that complicates and impairs the understanding of individuals as complex entities with multiple identities and conflicting meanings in the Arab world.

On another level, however, while Massad argues for approaching homosexuality within an international context in order to stress its complicity with orientalism and imperialism, his conception of homosexuality as exclusively a Western invention is not unproblematic. Massad's thesis that the emergence of homosexuality in the Middle East is merely a result of Western imposition and internalization, in fact, adds another layer of complexity, estrangement, and alienation to the predicament of homosexuals in their Arab respective cultures. Massad's argument, in other words, seems to hinge on a flawed assumption that denies agency to homosexual individuals in the Arab World and their right to voice out their non-normative sexual orientations. In other words, "to reduce this complex process of subject formation to the imperial desires of the Gay International and its colonization of indigenous ways of being is reductionist and, it must be said, essentialist" (Makarem, 2009). Katherina Dalacoura (2014) notes that "for Massad, gays in the Middle East more generally are not free, morally responsible agents, making choices about their sexuality and gender, because these choices are enforced on them by someone else, namely the West" (p.1298). In a similar vein, Rahul Rao's critique of Massad over agency corroborates that "While there is much truth to Massad's claims about the aggressively orientaling tendencies of some contemporary Western LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] activism, there is also something deeply troubling about his denial of the agency and subjectivity of Arabs who are appropriating and reworking Western identities in their struggles for sexual self-determination. Massad dismisses such individuals as unrepresentative – 'a miniscule minority', 'small groups of men in metropolitan areas such as Cairo and Beirut' – but also, more ominously, as 'native informants' to Western activists, a phrase that is loaded with colonial memories of indigenous elites engaged in traitorous collaboration with colonizing powers. (2010, p.176)

The representation of homosexuality in *Only in London* both accommodates and destabilizes a variety of arguments built around homosexuality in the postcolonial and postmodern Arab World. First, the rejection of Samir's transvestite identity in the name of social cohesion and cultural integrity somehow confirms Massad's understanding of homosexuality as solely an alien ideology. That is, because of the perception of homosexuality as a Westernized form of sexual deviancy that is "impure" and alien to the conservative Islamic ideology of the Middle East, Samir's homosexual identity is deemed abhorrent and abnormal. The fear of westernization, impurity, and moral degradation is therefore deployed as a pretext to stifle anti-voices of heterosexuality in the Arab world. As a result, Samir is constantly indoctrinated and ultimately coerced to maintain social cohesion within the mainstream heteronormative structures of his society. Moreover, the phallic association of Arab masculinity with manly prowess, virility, activity, and reproduction further complicate Samir's transvestite identity in a postmodern Arab society in which men are demanded to mechanically reproduce heteropatriarchal norms that define masculinity as dominance. The moment where Samir is compelled to get married would be a good illustration of how heterosexual anxieties and sensibilities around homosexuality as an identity restrict and recognize sexuality only inside the heterosexual institution of marriage. Indeed, what masquerades here as "authenticity", "cohesion" and "purity", as postcolonial and nationalist constructs, are mechanisms of bio-power aimed at controlling sexuality in the Arab world. In a nutshell, one can observe here how in Samir's case both poles of the technologies of power, the disciplinary and the political, intervene in a parallel manner to forge a normative understanding of sexuality. As Foucault (1997) explains, "[the biopolitical] technology of power does not exclude ... disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques.... Unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species." (p.242)

Nonetheless, Samir's sexual agency and resistance are vividly presented throughout his life. As a determined and non-conformist subject, Samir vows to transcend all the power structures that seek to contain his body and deny his homosexual identity. Despite the efforts of his family, psychiatric hospital, and the heterosexual institution of marriage to regulate his sexuality and body, they cannot prevent him from expressing his homosexuality and valorizing it as an integral part of who he is and who he wishes to be. Introducing Samir in this way might explain how the author celebrates the individual's choice over the power of the homo-social order in an overarching heterosexual culture that does not tolerate one's sexual difference. Although being married off, Samir dresses up as a woman and goes out wearing "brightly coloured trousers and along colored shirt, and glasses with red flames" (150). When his family "couldn't get used to his passion for the wrong sex, not his taste in clothes, and when they realized that they couldn't change him, they forced him to leave Lebanon" (147). The fact that Samir's homosexual behavior is intolerable and because of the fear that his transgressive subjectivity might bring a social stigma to his family, he is eventually dismissed from his social milieu and forced to live out his "insanity" elsewhere other than in his family surroundings. It is at this juncture that a new phase in Samir's life starts to take place, thus announcing a turning point in the plot of the narrative and in Samir's quest for voicing out his transvestite identity. He, therefore, leaves Lebanon, his wife, and his children in an attempt to escape the heterosexual identity imposed on him, embarking on multiple journeys across the borders of Europe and the Middle East searching for ways to assert his dreamy sense of selfhood. From Lebanon to Dubai to finally London, Samir's search for his sexual agency and desire finally landed in England where free-floating sexual opportunities are thought to be offered to individuals to reinvent their selfhoods and reshape their identities in their own ways, for "he had imagined that, as soon as the plane set down in London, he'd see rows of English

boys undulating like golden ears of wheat, in red jeans or leather trousers, walking hand in hand" (88). For him, London means freedom: "I'm free, he cried" (32). Two months after moving to London, "he felt he belonged there and nowhere else, and he missed nobody. If he dared to say the truth, he would say that he didn't even miss his children" (149). When he walks the city streets, he feels free from the restraints that associate the closet with shame and fear in his home country:

Back home, people thought London was walking in the mist wrapped in a heavy coat and a furry pair of boots ... and that London was Piccadilly Circus, Oxford Street, Big Ben and Buckingham Palace. London was freedom. It was your right to do anything, any time. You didn't need to undergo a devastating war in order to be freed to do what you wanted, and when you didn't have to feel guilty or embarrassed, and start leading a double life and ultimately end up frustrated" (149).

London, in other words, seems to free Samir from the social guilt and the restrictions that entrapped him as a homosexual being in his home country. Fleeing the heterosexual identity imposed on him, Samir says, "I'm so happy on my own here [London]" (148). By juxtaposing the suppression of his sexual identity in Beirut with the humanization and freedom granted even to animals in London, Samir remarks bitterly: "here even the dogs have identity documents and medical certificates, and all their names are entered on a computer" (246).

However, rather than romanticizing London and the West by large as a haven place for individual "freedom" and sexual agency, the novel depicts Samir undergoing a double minority in the West, marginalized by both sexuality and ethnicity. Put differently, Samir's ethnicity, as an Arab and a homosexual, coupled with his limited knowledge of the English language and culture in diaspora prevent him from engaging in sexual relations with blond English men (90). As his Arabness gets in the way of his subsequent attempts to integrate into British mainstream society, Samir's desire to sexually cross into blond men with blue eyes will continue to be a farfetched dream, thus haunting his existence as a non-western homosexual in London. Again with his limited exposure to the English language, Samir fails to decode the signs around him, and he, therefore, becomes unable to figure out the signification of the world to which he is displaced. A good example of this could be the moment when he sees an advertisement featuring two men kissing each other at a phone booth in Soho. As a result of his overwhelming sexual desire, he envisions the place to be the haven for sexual freedom that he has been searching for all his life but had been unable to find. Unwilling to read, nor understand, what the advertisement signifies, he takes a taxi, shows the driver the ad, and asks him to pick him up at the specified location. To his astonishment, however, when he enters a neatly maintained and sanitized building, he immediately realizes that it is not the "homosexual brothel" he has imagined, "not the club, with music, dim lights and beautiful young men that he'd pictured" (91); rather it is an HIV clinic. Herein then begins another phase of anxiety, exclusion, and repression perplexing Samir in his search for sexual freedom in London. Upon entering the office, a receptionist greets him and hands him a form to fill in. On her desk, Samir can see a picture of a little girl with blond hair, which again frustrates him and shatters his expectations. Bewildered by all his surroundings and their significations, Samir thinks that in England "everything is done according to laws and protocol, even you-know-what" (91). When the receptionist asks him a series of personal questions, Samir feels uncomfortable to reveal the truth about his sexuality. His frustration is further intensified when the receptionist asks him if he has caught any sexually transmitted disease in the past. Once again, Samir's language deficiency blocks communication between him and the English woman receptionist. Misunderstanding both, the receptionist's words and the picture of a little blonde girl on her desk, he thinks of her: "she wants to try with me, to convince me to give up my habit and start liking women... you put photos of children up so that men will decide they're longing to have a family" (91). When he continues to sexually fantasize about the space, the receptionist apologizes for any falsehoods he may have about the space reminding him that "this is an Aids centre" (93).

Being surprised by the regulations and questions about his sexual privacy, Samir becomes uncomfortable with the laws and codes that regulate sexuality in England: ““even the things that people think are going to be difficult are simple in our country...there are no contracts or forms to fill in. You can do it in graveyards, garages, at roadblocks”” (91-92). His positive perception of England as a space for sexual freedom is collapsed by the restrictions imposed on sexual liberation. For him and the reader as well, the Aids centre conjures up the tragic memory of the psychiatry institution in Lebanon so far that both institutions seek to repress his desire by regulating and constraining his sexuality within the confines of marriage and medical therapy.

Not surprisingly, therefore, we encounter another oppressive and regulatory mechanism of power restricting homosexuality in the West, one that is embodied by the HIV centre. That the author chooses to incorporate scenes of HIV hospital in the diaspora is twofold; first, to delineate the psychological trauma that Samir is doomed to torment in exile because of his sexual, ethnic and racial difference; second, to unravel both the myth of sexual "freedom" and the limits of "liberal multiculturalism" in the West. That is to say, the Aids clinic combined with the politics of defining homosexuality as a pathological phenomenon in London reveals how exile is tied up to memory, illness, invisibility, and alienation, which continue to impair Samir from publicly coming out and achieving his sense of being in the host country. In so narrating, al-Shaykh's narrative undermines Western modern codifications and regulations of sexuality, and, in consequence, corroborates Foucault's critique of sexuality in the West. Her depiction of the image of the modern institution of HIV clinic and its modern legal codes coupled with their disciplining structures of sexuality in London is critical to Western allegiances to "liberal" discourse in the West. Indeed, Samir finds England similar to his homeland. Both have stifled his desire and regulated his sexual identity socially and politically. In other words, the author implies that the suppression of homosexuality is not exclusively and authentically reduced to Lebanon, or Arab culture only, but the expression of homosexual desire and its institutional disciplining also marks Western perception of queer identity. Ultimately, the portrayal of the family and the psychiatric hospital in Lebanon along with the HIV clinic in London reveals the extent to which articulations of homosexual identity are isolated, pathologized, and eliminated in the heteropatriarchal orthodoxy discourses of London and Beirut, East and West.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which the socio-political complexities and intricacies engulfing homosexuality and homosexual identities and bodies in the heteronormative discourses of the East and the West are contested and negotiated in Hanan al-Shaykh's narrative across the borders and boundaries of home and diaspora. Through close examination of Samir's homosexuality being perceived as a social pathology in his home country, the study illustrated how being homosexual in a machismo violent society allows no opportunity for non-normative sexual identities or androgynous positions to publicly come out. The complicity of Samir's family, state, and medical psychiatry with mainstream heteropatriarchy in Lebanon has been examined to demonstrate how social, medical, and political mechanisms of power continue to force homosexuality and homosexuals to live in shame, silence and secrecy in the Arab world. The analysis equally looked at the ways in which Samir, the non-western homosexual, is ostracized and alienated in England because of his ethnic, cultural, racial, and sexual difference. In so discussing, the study illustrated how al-Shaykh's narrative unravels and undermines at once the limits of "liberal multiculturalism" and the myth of sexual liberties in the West. Through the narration of the HIV institution in London, the study has shown how homosexuality is pathologized, medicalized and alienated



in the orthodoxy of the modern West. Displacement, alienation and pathologization of homosexuality combined with the reality of being ostracized from the political process, compound the homosexual Arab persona's sense of desperation, invisibility and exclusion both in the home country and in exile.

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