Arab-Muslim Masculinity on Trial: Gay Muslim Writers Broaching Homosexuality

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Abstract:
This paper will initially examine the importance of masculinity in Arab-Muslim societies before analysing the qualities that these societies deem imperative of masculinity. Ultimately, the paper will attempt to theorise the manner in which homosexuality destabilises these preconceptions about Arab-Muslim masculinity and male sexuality. Drawing on the hermeneutic readings of Lawrence R. Schehr in his book 'The Shock of Men: Homosexual Hermeneutics in French Writing', this paper sets out to reveal that masculinity in Arab-Muslim societies of the Maghreb "can be seen through other eyes, interpreted through other figured, or opened up to different possibilities if the mechanics of sexual reproduction are not given transcendental cultural meaning" (Schehr viii). Homosexuality will be viewed as an important locus of exerting "pressure on simplistic notions of identity and [disturbing] the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity" (Day xi).

1 In an article entitled "Violence, Sexuality and Women's lives", Lori Heise makes the astute observation that in numerous cultures, men fight daily to prove to themselves and to others that they qualify to belong to the esteemed category of male. She attests that by not being a man, one is reduced to the status of woman or queer. Three overarching arguments can be deduced from Heise's reflections. To begin with, she brings to light the question of the perceptible difference between being a male and being a man. Secondly, she draws a clear distinction between "man" and the inferior category of "woman". Ultimately, there is the question of the orientation of desire and eroticism as expressed by the heterosexual and homosexual binary. These questions are undoubtedly key in the construction of masculinity in the predominantly heteropatriarchal Arab-Muslim societies of North Africa. Lahoucine Ouzgane justly indenitfies in the introduction to his book *Islamic Masculinities* that "at a time when masculinities studies is experiencing a tremendous boom in the West, masculinity in Islamic cultures has so far remained an underexamined category that secures its power by refusing to identify itself" (1). Maxime Cervulle and Nick Rees Roberts concur, adding that masculinity subsists by making itself unrecognisable and by acquiescently not saying its name (53). Arab-Muslim masculinity as a field of inquiry and research has persisted a *terra incognita* in that by remaining "unrecognisable", it poses a daunting task to comprehend what it is, how it is constructed and how it is regulated. There is however need, as suggested by Ouzgane, to deconstruct the sacrosanctity that Islamic masculinity has created about itself so

as to "render Muslim men visible as gendered subjects and show that masculinities have a history and are part of gender relations in Muslim counties" (1).

2 A brief presentation of the four writers as well as their works would be a convenient point of departure. Rachid O. is considered the contemporary pioneer of openly writing about homosexuality in North Africa. Born in 1970 in Rabat, he studied in Marrakech before obtaining a scholarship to study at the Villa Médicis in Rome in the year 2000. To date, he has published five novels; *L'Enfant Ébloui* (1995), *Plusieurs Vies* (1996), *Chocolat Chaud* (1998) and *Ce qui Reste* (2003) and *Analphabètes* (2013), which form a series detailing fragmented memories of the protagonist-narrator's attempt to assume his homosexuality in a Muslim society in Morocco. Abdellah Taïa was born in 1973 and he studied in Rabat before moving to Geneva where he studied for a semester in the mid-1990s. He thereafter moved to pursue further studies in Paris at the Sorbonne. In four of his autofictional novels namely, *Mon Maroc* (2000), *Le Rouge du Tarbouche* (2004), *L'Armée du Salut* (2006) and *Une Mélancolie Arabe* (2008) he confronts the difficulty of assuming a homosexual identity in a homophobic Arab-Muslim society that is deeply entrenched in piety and cultural practices. The action of the novels fluctuates between Morocco and France and the narrator of the four novels is called Abdellah Taïa like the author and the four books depict different stages of the narrator's quest to construct and adopt an exclusively "gay"[1] identity. As for Eyet-Chékib Djaziri, he was born in Tunis in 1957 of a Turco-Tunisian father and a French mother. Aged sixteen, he moved to France with his mother upon the divorce of his parents. He cut short his studies, at the age of twenty-two years, in order to join an airline in which he travelled around the world and only retiring after sixteen years. It is then that he devoted himself to writing. His autofictional diptych *Un Poisson sur la Balançoire* (1997) and *Une Promesse de Douleur et de Sang* (1998) portrays the sexual awakening of the protagonist-narrator named Sofiène in a Tunisian society which, as Eric Levéel states, condemns queer sexuality even though it is obsessed by it (88). Finally Ilmann Bel, the youngest of the four writers. He was born in 1982 in Paris to Algerian parents. He has worked as an actor and model. *Un Mauvais Fils* (2010) is his debut novel and it chronicles the challenges faced by a young protagonist, Zacharia, as he grapples with his (homo)sexuality in the neighbourhoods of Paris. In addition to his sexuality, the protagonist has to face stigmatisation and racial profiling in the country of his birth. All

[1] The term "gay" is used in inverted quotes given its contentious nature vis-à-vis Arab-Muslim societies of the Maghreb. Sophie Smith summarises in such terms the problem surrounding the use of the term "gay" in reference to the Maghreb: "Established scholarly consensus on the subject has traditionally asserted that a 'gay' identity as it has emerged in recent decades in the West does not exist in cultures of Muslim heritage. Though this area of enquiry is rife with terminological problems and cross-cultural misunderstandings, most critics agree there is no 'gay' identity in Islamic countries" (2012: 36)

the writers, except Ilmann Bel, are on some form of self-imposed exile in France. This exile is certainly not permanent because they oftentimes return to their countries of origin for short visits. The exile is largely motivated by the need to fully assume their homosexuality, which is evidently impossible to do in the Maghreb. These writers, as is the case with their protagonists, frame their identitary construction within particular socio-historical and cultural contexts and backgrounds be it in the Maghreb or on the other side of the Mediterranean sea in France.

3 Portraying Arab-Muslim masculinity in is central to the novels of the four contemporary gay writers of Maghrebian descent as they openly broach male homosexuality, a subject area which in the countries of the Maghreb remains not simply a taboo but also a crime punishable by a prison sentence or fine or both[2]. The novels of this burgeoning canon of gay writers are synchronous with the mounting interest in various aspects of and potential common points between literary production and the deconstruction of homosexuality and masculinity in the Arab-Muslim countries of North Africa.

4 It is herein posited that the novels of Rachid O., Abdellah Taïa, Eyet-Chékib Djaziri and Ilmann Bel fearlessly challenge and intently interrogate simplistic and often monolithic definitions of Arab-Muslim masculinities. The novels of these writers, through an open broaching of male homosexuality, question the roles and performance of masculinity in predominantly Arab-Muslim communities, in North Africa and to a smaller extent in France[3]. Their novels embody the "distinction made by modern Western 'sexuality' between sexual and gender identity, that is, between *kinds* of sexual predilections and *degrees* of masculinity and femininity, [which] has until recently had little resonance" (Dunne 8) in Arab-Muslim nations. They also provide a vital alternative not just of masculinity but also of male sexuality and eroticism. This paper centres on the questions posed by Abdessamad Dialmy who asks: "*Qu'est-ce qu'un homme? Naît-on homme? Suffit-il de naître male pour être un homme? Le devient-on? Est-on homme indépendamment de l'orientation sexuelle? À quoi donc réfère l'identité masculine?*" (5) [What is a man? Is one born a man? Does it suffice to be born male

[2] Article 338 of Algerian law states that "anyone guilty of a homosexual act is punishable with imprisonment, and a fine of between 500 and 2000 Algerian Dinars. In Morocco, homosexuality is equally illegal and according to Section 489 of its penal code, it carries a penalty that ranges from six months to three years in prison as well as a fine of 120 to 1200 Dirhams. As for the situation in Tunisia, Article 230 of the Penal Code of 1913 (which was largely amended in 1964) punishes private acts of sodomy between consenting adults with a prison term of up to three years.

[3] This article examines Arab-Muslim communities of North Africa and France because the action of the novels that are herein analysed takes places in these two geographical locations separated by the Mediterranean. Due to migration, a considerable Maghrebian community is currently found in France, which had previously colonised the three Maghrebian countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

to be a man? Or does one become it? Is one a man regardless of sexual orientation? To what therefore does masculine identity refer?][4]. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's assertion "one is not born a woman, but one becomes one" (1941: 31), Dialmy ponders on the constitution of masculine subjectivities and identities. The literary characters of the four writers grapple with similar questions as they seek to define their masculinity and show that it is not cast in stone but rather that is has several shades.

5 Through an initial examination of the centrality of masculinity in Arab-Muslim societies as well as the defining qualities of masculinity, it is herein theorised that homosexuality destabilises the traditionalist and neo-traditionalist perceptions of masculinity and male sexuality. Drawing on the hermeneutic readings of Lawrence R. Schehr, it will be revealed that masculinity in Arab-Muslim societies of the Maghreb "can be seen through other eyes, interpreted through other figured, or opened up to different possibilities if the mechanics of sexual reproduction are not given transcendental cultural meaning" (viii). Furthermore, it will be argued that homosexuality is an important locus of exerting "pressure on simplistic notions of identity and [disturbing] the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity" (Day xi).

6 In Muslim communities a rigid separation between the sexes exists and as noted by As'ad AbuKhalil, "male supremacy is assumed to be an integral part of the faith, nay of the moral obligation of worship. Not that Islam favours full gender equality; it does not, and the view that culture is solely responsible for the oppression and repression of women in the Middle East ignores the dynamic interaction between culture and religion over time" (93). He further posits that "the construction of modern masculinity in Western societies was not similar to that in Eastern societies. The rigid lines of separation and distinction between males and females, or between homosexuals and heterosexuals, were lines of qualitative moral designation. Males and heterosexuals represent the ideal social and natural roles, from the standpoint of established clerical opinion" (101). Notwithstanding these gender inequalities, Durre Conway-Long find that what is of principal importance in the understanding of Islamic sexuality, as might be the case of any form of masculinity, "is the perception of the relations between men and women in their society" (145).

7 Abdessamad Dialmy and Allon J. Uhlmann characterise masculinity as "the capacity to act, and the capacity to act is not only the ability to sexually penetrate but also the ability to prevent sexual penetration" (2005: 19). They go on to develop that:

[4] This and other translations in this paper are my own.

> Within the Arab epistemology of sexuality that reduces sexual activity to penetration, this act becomes a fundamental condition for the construction and empowerment of the Arab male ego and for securing his mental health. This pattern in the integration of sexuality into the personality of the Arab man makes sexuality the basic determinant of the masculine personality and, moreover, turns sexuality into a pivotal meaning of life for the Arab man.

The male child is socialised so as to glorify his penis. Its circumcision marks an important step in the creation of the masculine identity. Through circumcision, the boy is delivered from the prepuce, liberated from the female province and thereby acquiring virility (Bonnet 838). In this socialisation of the male child, the female is viewed as an object of sexual desire and in a blog article published in 2009, Dialmy remarks that "to be a man is to be a king, and to be a king is to be a man. To be a man sultan means to be virile, it means to dominate the wife, it means first to be married. Therefore, the male (*rajal*) is the harsh man, as opposed to the lenient man (*rouijel*). The man is the master who must sexually initiate the wife and control her later on the sexuality of his female offspring (the preservation of virginity)".

8 Although there has been discernible change in the hierarchical relationship between the sexes especially considering that Maghrebian societies have undergone considerable transformation, specifically in relation to issues on sexuality and reproduction, masculinity still holds sway to its hegemonic position. The education and employment of women has done little to destabilise masculinity's dominance. The predominantly Arab-Muslim societies of North-Africa continue to be hétéropatriarcal in the sense that they are essentially based on male supremacy which is intrinsically constructed on a system of gender binaries that assumes heterosexuality as a social norm.

9 Besides, in the predominantly conservative and heteropatriarchal societies of the Maghreb, male children are held in considerably high esteem. According to the protagonist-narrator Abdellah in Abdellah Taïa's novel *L'Armée du Salut* (2006), "*un garçon est, quoi qu'il arrive, un signe positif, synonyme de bonne fortune, de richesse, de bonheur*" (27) [A boy, whatever happens, is a positive sign, a synonym of good fortune, wealth, happiness]. The same narrator explains in another novel, Mon Maroc (2000) that his father had been oddly dejected, awfully frustrated and peculiarly disappointed because before the birth of the said narrator, he had just one son and many female children. The birth of Abdellah is celebrated because a male child augured well for the honour and the name of the family: "*on me gâtait; je l'étais le centre d'intérêt, l'être le plus important de la famille, le plus aimé. Leur fierté à plus d'un titre et surtout grâce à mon sexe: masculine. Désiré, j'étais depuis des années et des années*" (14) [I was spoiled, l was the centre of attraction, the most important

person in the family, the most loved. Their pride in more ways than one, and especially because of my sex: male. Desired, l was for years and years]. Abdellah was a child for whom the family, the father in particular, had exceedingly verdant hopes and expectations in as far as perpetuating the family name and honour. These hopes and expectations are certainly more pronounced in modest and impoverished families (Dialmy & Uhlmann 25).

10 It is important to enumerate at this point the different qualities that are considered fundamental in the construction of a "man" and a masculine identity. What is profoundly interesting is how the protagonists of the four writers obstinately refuse to espouse the Arab-Muslim ideals of the conception of masculinity. To begin with, two directly contrasting forms of masculinity are presented. The first, superior and reified, is manifested through intelligence, action, virility, power and the propensity for dominance. The other model, comparable to femininity, is characterised by passivity, submission and affective predisposition. Instead of exhibiting the manly traits of virility and physical fortitude, the four protagonists effortlessly embrace their "feminine side". Abdellah, in the novel *Le Rouge du Tarbouche* (2004), is reproached by his elder brother because he carries himself in an "unmanly" fashion: "*tu vois comment tu parles, et ces gestes, et ces manières: les homes, les vrais homes ne font pas comme ça, ils se tiennent bien, ils sont virils…*" (82) [you see your way of talking, and your gestures, and your mannerisms: men, real men do not do that,

> *La grâce qui accompagnait ma démarche et tous mes gestes ne provoquait que les quolibets de ceux qui me croisaient, voire parfois une certaine agressivité dont quelques-uns accompagnaient leurs moqueries. La voix féminine, qui s'envolait de ma gorge en notes cristallines, déclenchait des vocations d'imitateurs chez ceux qui m'entendaient parler. (Un Poisson sur la Balançoire 5)*
> [The grace which accompanied my gait and all my gestures simply aroused jeers from those who crossed my path, and sometimes aggressiveness accompanied some of their mockery. The feminine voice, which flew from my throat in crystalline notes, triggered off many imitations from those who heard me speak].

Sofiène's behaviour is heavily marked by a feminine grace and this is also similar for Abdellah who accepts that he is mawkishly effeminate and even expresses the desire to be a woman: "*j'aurais aimé être une femme. Une vraie femme. J'aurais aimé être un fou. Un vrai fou. C'est ce que j'allais devenir, un jour*" (*Une Melancolie Arabe* 30) [I would have loved to be a woman. A real woman. I would have loved to be mad. A real mad person. This is what l would become]. What is distinctly interesting in this assertion is how Abdellah refers to his desire to be a woman to be madness. Deviance from what is assigned to one's sex and gender is considered madness because it goes against the established order of social behaviour. Sofiène also expresses a similar desire to be a woman:

> *Je regardais mon ventre plat. Je posais la main dessus et, tout en me caressant, je prenais conscience que malheureusement jamais je ne porterais son enfant. Ni le sien, ni celui de qui que ce soit. Dans le fond, la nature était très injuste de priver les hommes du plaisir de donner la vie. De ce côté-là, les femmes pouvaient s'estimer largement favorisées. (Un Poisson sur la Balançoire* 37)
> [I looked at my flat tummy. I put my hands on it, and caressing myself, l realised that unfortunately I would never carry his child. Neither his nor that of anyone else. In essence, nature had been very unjust in depriving men the pleasure of giving life. On this one, women could consider themselves largely fortunate].

Durre Conway-Long describes this aching desire by a man to want to bear a child as "the uterus envy" (147). This "uterus envy" in the case of the two above-mentioned protagonists is in itself a clear subversion of the status quo which requires of men to be virile, dominating and macho. In so doing, these protagonists render themselves less than men because in the words of Abdellah he was "*un homme qui a oublié d'être un homme*" (*Une Mélancolie Arabe* 32) [a man who had forgotten to be a man].

11 In spite of the protagonists being in touch with their feminine side, they refuse to be identified as women. What is however unfortunate is that their societies do not reason in the same way as them. In fact, young sexually frustrated men take advantage of these effeminate boys who treat them as substitutes for women, who remain inaccessible to them.[5] Abdellah for example when an older boy tries to abuse him sexually, demands to be treated as an equal and not an inferior: "*j'ai voulu un moment lui donner mon vrai prénom, lui dire que j'étais un garcon, un homme comme lui… Lui dire qu'il me plaisait et qu'il n'y avait pas besoin de violence entre nous, que je me donnerais à lui heureux si seulement il arrêtait de me féminiser*" (*Une Mélancolie Arabe* 21) [For a moment l wanted to give him my real name, to tell him that l was a boy, a man like him… To tell him that l liked him and there was no need for violence between us, I would happily give myself to him if only he stopped feminising me][6]. This scene embodies two conflicting discourses on the definition of masculinity. On the one side is the patriarchal discourse that defines masculinity in terms of biology, physique and the social roles that a man has to fulfil. Simone de Beauvoir terms this the "eternal

[5] Abdellah Taïa suggests in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* of 25 March 2012 that in Arab-Muslim societies of the Maghreb, particularly in his home country of Morocco, so as to safeguard the virginity of girls before marriage, there is a strict separation of boys and girls as they grow up. Such a separation is aimed at ensuring that girls are virgins when the time arrives for their marriage and also to assist boys to resist "temptation". The fact that premarital sexual encounters are vastly reduced subsequently creates sexual frustration in some individuals. Taïa points out in this respect that "by the time [he] was 10, though no one spoke of it, [he] knew what happened to boys like [him] in [his] impoverished society; they were designated victims, to be used, with everyone's blessing, as easy sexual objects by frustrated men". Given the difficulty, though not impossibility, of sexual encounters with members of the opposite sex, one of the available alternatives is sexual encounters between members of the same sex.

[6] Although anal sex between men and women is considered to be a way to maintain virginity and is therefore rationalised as being not "haram" (sinful), anal sex between men is deemed a "liwat" (sin of Lot's people).

masculine" (485) which is primarily characterised by the capacity to think, act, work and create. This discourse relegates any individual who lacks virility and physical robustness to the status of non-masculine. This discourse is contrasted by one that surpasses the limits of the bio-physical as it is up to the individual to construct and define his own masculinity. This masculinity is different from the first in that instead of being fixed and stagnant, it is a phenomenon that is in a constant of becoming and of redefining itself.

12 By bringing into conversation the theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler on the construction of identities and genders, it is possible to better understand the manner in which the second discourse briefly described above comes into being. When de Beauvoir asks the question, "what is a woman" (13), she implicitly questions the categories of feminine and masculine. From her existential theoretical framework, she responds that one is not born a woman but becomes it because each subject firmly arises through such projects of transcendence as she accomplishes her liberty by perpetually overshooting other liberties. As such, identity and gender are not stable phenomena but are constituted in a perpetual interaction with both space and time. This blends in perfectly with the postulations of Butler in that she insists that identity is established through a stylised repetition of social acts (1990: 4). For the protagonists in the novels of the writers under consideration, it is a question of repetition of general modes of operation that are socially deemed masculine.

13 Another important factor in the definition of masculinity is the question of activity and passivity. The male has by default been assigned the active role in contrast to the female that is reduced to passivity. Activity is often accompanied by the insatiable desire to dominate and there is in this a patriarchal operation which emphasises that the male is active and domineering. He notes that to be an active agent is to simply mechanically reproduce heteropatriarchal norms that define masculinity as domination. The protagonists in the novels of the four previously mentioned writers of Maghrebian origin categorically refuse to perfunctorily reproduce these societal demands, whether in everyday life or in the sexual act, they are not ashamed to assume the role called passive. Abdellah says repeatedly that he was not made either to direct or to dominate. His young brother, Mustapha, must remind him time after time that being a "man" is to be aggressive and to be domineering: "*tu comprends? Réponds quand je te parle, ne sois pas mou. Il faut se battre dans la vie… Tu me suis*" (Mon Maroc 43) [do you understand? Answer when l speak to you, do not be soft. In life you have to fight for yourself. Do you follow me…].

14 In as far as the (homo)sexual act is concerned, the four protagonists readily assume the passive position. Talking about his boyfriend Khélil, Sofiène explains: "*je me faisais un*

devoir de satisfaire son désir. Je devais me soumettre à ses assauts virils. Ces pensées de soumission, cette idée que l'homme que j'aimais s'était planté dans mon corps pour en jouir, m'amenèrent au paroxysme de l'excitation" (*Un Poisson sur la Balançoire* 35) [I made it a point to satisfy his desire. I had to submit to his manly assaults. These thoughts of submission, the idea that the man I loved had penetrated my body to find pleasure, brought me to a paroxysm of excitement]. Sofiène accepts to be penetrated and is proud of the fact that he is able to bring pleasure to his lover. In this way, he is delighted in taking on the role that his Tunisian society would label as a female one. For him, what is important is the sexual pleasure he gets and provides.

15 Abdellah expresses similar sentiments as he is also happy to become a "woman" as he accepts to be penetrated. In a letter to Slimane, a former lover, Abdellah says: "*tu as fait de moi ce que tu as voulu. Je suis devenu une femme arabe soumise à toi*" (*Une Mélancolie Arabe* 130) [you did what you wanted with me. I became a submissive Arab woman for you]. He concludes a few paragraphs later that: "*j'ai tenu comme j'ai pu. J'ai arrêté de travailler. Je suis devenu une petite femme. Ta conception de la femme. […] Je suis devenu une sculpture entre tes mains*" (132) [I held on as much as l could. I even stopped going to work. I became a little woman. Your conception of a woman. [...] I became a sculpture in your hands]. To please his lover, Abdellah explains above that he is literally transformed into a submissive Arab-Muslim woman who is reduced to doing menial and ensuring that the "man" is sexually satisfied.

16 Zacharia in Ilmann Bel's novel Mauvais Fils (2010) even though he accepts to be penetrated, his reasons are somewhat different. Zacharia is driven primarily by his desire for money:

> *Je ne dis rien. Je songe à la façon dont je gagne mon argent de poche. […] Qu'importe pas où il faut en passer, il n'y a que le résultat qui compte. Qu'est-ce que c'est que d'offrir son corps, juste une heure de sa vie, pour donner du plaisir à quelqu'un tout en accédant à ses ambitions?* (42)
> [I say nothing. I think of how I earn my pocket money. [...] What does it matter what one has to do, only the result counts. What is it to offer one's body, just an hour of one's life, to give pleasure to someone whilst achieving one's ambitions?].

Money is what is important to Zacharia and if obtaining it involves being passive and being penetrated by another man; he gladly accepts that as a means to an end. Despite his enjoyment of his (homo)sexual exploits , it is undeniable that there is a commodification of his Arab body, eroticism and sexuality by mostly white Frenchmen who see in him an exotic spectacle.

17 It is interesting to remark, as did Dialmy, that sexual identity is constructed in two manners in traditional Arab-Muslim societies: masculine and non-masculine (2009, 18). Active and macho men compose the masculine grouping whilst the non-masculine group includes women, children as well as sexual minorities like homosexuals. The main characteristic of the masculine the ability to penetrate and the act of penetration is an essential element that gives power to the Arab-Muslim male ego. As for Stephen O. Murray, he finds that sexual identity in Arab-Muslim communities is concerned with the question of domination and submission and not necessarily the sexual orientation of the participants in the sexual act (41). Therefore when two men have sexual intercourse, it is not viewed as a homosexual act because the penetrator is considered "the masculine" whilst the penetrated is "the non-masculine" (Ibid). Dialmy also attests that to penetrate the other is to be active, it is to be masculine, it is to be valued (2009, 40). However, to be penetrated is to be passive, to be feminine and to be devalued. Masculinity is thus perceived as the all dominant and all penetrating construction as opposed to femininity which is viewed as submission and passivity. What is therefore essential to ask at this point is how the protagonists of the four writers can lay claim to their masculinity when they are content with assuming the submissive role of passivity in the sexual act? Rachid O. problematizes this question of dominant versus dominated in his last novel *Analphabètes* (2013) in which he describes a young Moroccan called Assel who feels emasculated after having been penetrated by a French man. Assel confides in the protagonist-narrator that: "*le choix de coucher avec un homme est vraiment minable, de toute façon. La prochaine femme que je baiserai, crois-moi, elle va morfler. Je serai sur elle comme un vautour et je ne la lâcherai pas avant de me sentir le roi du monde*" (63) [the choice to sleep with a man is quite insignificant. The next woman with whom l will sleep, believe me, will be in for it. I will be on her like a vulture and l will not let her go until l have felt like the king of the world]. Assel's story presents an interesting phenomenon in Arab-Muslim societies where men are involved in homosexual activities although they do not identify as being homosexual, in the Western sense of the term[7]. For these, there is a clear distinction between "performance" and "being" because it is possible to perform homosexuality without necessarily being homosexual. In Assel's case, being penetrated by another man leaves him with a feeling of being less than a male. To overcome this feeling of emasculation, he directs his anger on women. Through having sexual relations

[7] cf. footnote number one of the present article.

with women he regains his masculinity given that he in turn is able to dominate a presumed "non-masculine" (Murray 41).

18 As previously noted, the protagonists of the four writers subvert, in spite of themselves, the established order as they demand a redefinition of identities and normative genders. It should be remarked that there is indeed, in the novels of the four authors, the emergence of a new form of Arab-Muslim masculinity that is not reliant on heteropatriarchal dictates. This new masculinity which is directly connected to the open acceptance of a homosexual subjectivity is constructed by the individuals through a dialogical interaction with a particular social and historical context. Marcia-Claire Inhorn considers these "emergent masculinities" (300) as an attempt to capture all that is transformative in the personality and being of a man who, consciously or unconsciously, defies religious, cultural and societal orthodoxies and dogmas. When Abdellah poses the question "ça sert à quoi d'être un homme ?" (*Mon Maroc* 24) [What use is it to be a man?], he interrogates the system of values that is used to moderate and categorise identities and sexualities in predominantly Arab-Muslim settings.

19 Rachid O., Abdellah Taïa, Eyet-Chékib Djaziri and Ilmann Bel present in their autofictional works, a subversive masculinity through their presentation of characters that are comfortable with their feminine side whilst firmly acknowledging their masculinity. The apocalyptic vision of the novels emanates from the melancholic air that pervades them owing to the difficulty of imposing this emergent Arab-Muslim masculinity on both sides of the Mediterranean. For the characters, the Maghreb presents itself as a cherished yet homophobic place which refuses to accept their difference. Although, France offers a more accommodating milieu in as far as the free expression of their difference is concerned, the characters have to contend with stigmatisation, exclusion and being stereotyped in their country of exile. The protagonists are condemned to languish in an eternal form of physical, spiritual and emotional exile. It is in this exile, this "*mélancolie arabe*" (Arab melancholia) as Abdellah Taïa terms it, that the protagonists have to attempt to make sense of not just their masculinity but also of their sexuality and nationality. This melancholia, which is brought about by the subversive nature of this emergent Arab-Muslim masculinity, should not be viewed as a negative phenomenon. It should be regarded as a positive force which undermines heteropatriarchal categorisations of sexualities, identities and genders.

20 The novels of Taïa, O., Djaziri and Bel call for a change in the consideration and definition of masculinity. It is interesting that this redefinition of masculinity is done not just within existing definitions of Arab-Muslim masculinity but also in relation to femininity.

Lawrence R. Schehr rightly acknowledges the importance of this dialogue between emergent masculinities and feminism:

> Feminism has taught us that there are 'other' voices that are disfigured or compromised by their relation to the power structure and the signifying system. Feminism has also taught us that that this 'otherness' is not at all secondary. […] It has also expounded upon the differences in form and detail that an 'other' discourses might have, unique to itself and as valid as the forms of the dominant discourse. (viii)

The novels of the four writers present homosexuality and emergent masculinities not as inferior to the hegemonic and dominant masculinity. They call for a reconceptualised consideration of homosexuality and emergent Arab-Muslim masculinity as phenomena that are complete in themselves and not necessarily subsumed to the dominant and culturally idealised form of masculinity which has asserted itself as having a transcendental primacy and supremacy.

21 Homosexuality and anal penetration, we can argue in conclusion, destabilises the sacrosanct position that has been occupied by macho masculinity. As such, homosexuality undoes "the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave […] in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried" (Bersani 29). Homosexuality, and the inherent emergent masculinity, challenges not only the salience of gender in social stratification but more importantly the policing of desire and sexuality.

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