

Gender(ed) Wars in *Disciples of Passion*

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Abstract:

In this essay, I read Hoda Barakat's *Disciples of Passion* through a queer lens, framing the discussion through the literary reception of Barakat's work. Queer affects materialize through Barakat's memory-generated, discontinuous narrative. I suggest that the narrative reveals the narrator's sexual desire for the beloved to be intertwined with his desire for a preborn, presocial, and unsexed body. The narrator's killing of the beloved, and his subsequent (re)construction of her character through memory, cannot be pulled apart from his own struggle to approximate gendered ideals of desire and embodiment. My reading locates the beloved simultaneously inside and outside the narrator—an observation which may open the space for an alternative storyline in Barakat's novel.

In *Disciples of Passion*, Hoda Barakat's narrator is an anonymous man who was kidnapped and tortured during the Civil War in Lebanon. The narrator tells his story from memory as he resides in Dayr al-Salib, a missionary mental health institution. The novel opens at the moment the narrator has just murdered his beloved, a moment where he "reclaimed" his skin and "retrieved [his] protective shell, strong and seamless, unbroken by cracks or punctures" (Barakat and Booth 1). As the novel progresses, the reader learns that the narrator struggles with the coherence and clarity of his memory: his narrative is an attempt to position himself and his beloved in a storyline that shows how his passion sparked, developed, and ended in murder. In the closing chapter, the narrator questions whether he murdered his beloved. He says: "sometimes when I return from my many spells of amnesia, I believe that I did not kill her, that I did not kill anyone. That my sick mind, as it fragmented, was leaping inside my head, escaping as its whims told it" (Barakat and Booth 135). Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly moves between the spaces of his memory and the setting of the mental institution, blurring the boundaries between the present and the past, and between Dayr al-Salib and Lebanon in war.

Barakat's narrator is a traveler in memory, engaged in a process of (re)constructing his self and others. The shifting boundaries reveal his ambivalence towards relating to others and feeling isolation at once, heightened by his marginalized position in Dayr al-Salib. The trauma of his kidnapping and torture effectively functions as what Dina Georgis calls a "crisis of knowledge," in which "the symbolic context that endows sense to the everyday is broken down and the taken-for-granted world is lost or threatened" (10). This crisis of knowledge allows the narrator to explore spaces that depart from a normativity constituted by the war's social relations and constructs. Indeed, he moves in a space of rebellion that paradoxically reifies, rejects, and reimagines his self, as well as his and others' belonging to social groups and identities. This space of rebellion also reveals underscores the "queer affects" that Georgis describes as "creating and recreating the dilemmas of relationality" (14). One such dilemma between self and other takes place between him and the beloved. Her trajectory is simultaneously constituted by violence and tenderness, by differentiation and assimilation. Further, the narrator's dilemmas extend to his own self: the multiplication of his body and his desire for a different embodiment challenge the relation of his body to his assigned sex and gender.

In this reading, I focus on moments that create the potential for encountering queer affects within the narrative. I understand queer affects to contain desires that cannot be accounted for by social norms. I start by discussing parody and the possibilities that emerge from Barakat's destabilized narrative arch and structure. Then, I revisit passages that trace the narrator's moving boundaries and highlight his troubled belonging to spheres of relation. Finally, I discuss the narrator's self, desire, and body in relation to the character of the beloved as the woman inside. My reading locates the beloved simultaneously inside and outside the narrator, as guided by Barakat's language and the openness of her narrative structure. This observation follows the lead of critics¹ in reading gender and embodiment in her work as constituted

¹ Hanadi Al-Samman, Samira Aghacy, Moneera al-Ghadeer, Mona Fayyad, and Khalid Hadeed have discussed Barakat's destabilizing of binaries and constructs of gender and sexuality in their readings of her work.

beyond the binaries of man/woman and male/female. The emerging presence of the beloved, characterized as “the woman inside,” connects the narrator’s memory to the female and unsexed origin of his own body.

The Narrative Arch: Parody

Readings of *Disciples of Passion* suggest that the novel illustrates the narrator’s internalization of the Civil War’s violence. Mona Takieddine Amyuni writes that Barakat uses parody “to incorporate and challenge, with intense dramatic irony, the cruel practices” of the war (39). The multiple positionalities of the narrator, whether in exclusion and group belonging or in identity and outside of it, portray him as both aggressor and victim. In his movement between polarities, he unearths and embodies the violence of boundary-making on self and others. Violence directed at an “other” occurs by the absolute exclusion of the other from the self and its collective belonging, which renders this “other” a depersonalized, suspicious, and vulnerable body. However, I suggest that Amyuni’s reading of parody may be stretched beyond the practices of the war and towards the dynamics that make relations between violence, gender, the body, and desire legible. In effect, Barakat is engaging with an intersecting and multilayered parody of gender and desire in the context of the Civil War.² One notion of parody that applies to the narrative would be the concept of gender mimicry as Judith Butler explains it. Another would be the mimicry of the notion of an impossible, ideal love that Barabara Winckler points out in her reading of the novel.

In the context of queer theory, Butler presents the notion of parody as a conscious mimicry of the socially-ascribed gender, which exposes the consolidation of a construct’s stability and continuity through exaggeration (174). Butler conceives of gender as a performance that mimics an ideal identity, which is an unreal social construction of femininity or masculinity. Since the narrator’s story is marked by amnesiac interruptions, the narrative particularly lends itself to creating characters through a Butlerian discontinuity that is characteristic of gender. Barakat uses the discontinuous narrative structure to show the movement towards identity constructs: in approximating and eluding a position of manhood, the connection between the narrator’s “male” body and a masculine gender is destabilized. The rupture between the narrator’s self and his body further disturbs the socially-constituted stability of his maleness, destabilizing the binary category of sex (male/female).

In her reading of the novel, Winckler describes the narrator as rendered mad through his obsessive desire for “the ideal of an absolute love which cannot be lived out in reality,” a trope she traces back to Majnun Layla and Uthri poetry (160). Though this notion of the ideal is a helpful strategy for approaching the narrator’s dilemma and his narrative arch, Winckler departs from reading war and trauma as substantial elements in the novel; she claims that madness operates only through juxtaposed Arabic literary and Sufi traditions of “lovesickness or mystical experience” (166). While the narrator’s desire for an ideal is pervasive throughout the novel, the socio-historical context cannot be dismissed. The context of the Civil

² One layer of parody that would be interesting to explore but lies outside the scope of this paper is Michelle Hartman’s observation that Barakat narrates “the opposite tale” of Um Kalthoum’s song *ahl al-hawa*.

War (re)constructs ideals of desire and gender, further distancing the Christian narrator's desire for the Muslim beloved from real life attainability. Moreover, as Tarek El-Ariss illustrates, madness "unveils desire," and may thus function as a space of rebellion that "destabilizes the social and cultural codes of love and sexuality" (299). The narrator's madness may be read as engendered by his obsession for an ideal love. However, the context within which the narrator conceives of his own absolute love, which is both informed by and positioned against the "social and cultural codes of love," influences his trajectory towards his ideal.

I suggest that Winckler's assertion of a movement towards an absolute desire may be complicated by Butler's notion of parody as movement towards an ideal gender. Conceiving of a movement towards an ideal desire that is inextricable from gender in its "unrealness" may productively complicate Barakat's parody as multilayered and intersectional. Barakat's narrator often transgresses the boundary that differentiates between his body and his beloved's. The spaces of gender and desire often overlap in his contemplations, effectively blurring the boundary between the two parodies of gender and desire.

Queer Affects in the Collective Body

The narrator's movement between individuality and a sense of collective or group belonging uncovers the queer affects that Georgis articulates as "unrecognizable desires" (15). Some of these affects occur in instances where the narrator uses the first-person plural to describe himself and the patients in Dayr al-Salib. For instance, the narrator draws an analogy between Dayr al-Salib's patients and plants that challenge common sense by not leaning towards sunlight (Barakat and Booth 22). This association ruptures the divide between plant and human, revealing the desire to escape sunlight as contradictory to a normative trajectory towards survival. The movement of turning away from sunlight betrays light's torturous effect—light elicits pain in the body by being intensified as it is reflected off the walls and floor of the hospital (Barakat and Booth 22-3). The hospital's architecture and its staff are complicit in light's offensive on the bodies of the patients, placing the collective "we" of the narrator into a marginal space characterized by a paradoxical vulnerability to what usually is necessary for life.

The narrator slips from the first person singular to the plural as he describes the trajectory of the light's movement within the room and into the body's organs. An escape from this pain, from this torture, occurs when it rains: the patients get "a small respite as the sky bent low and darkened and the fine needles retreated from [their] heads" (24). As they hear the sound of rain falling on the roof, an "out-of-doors sound that wrapped round the buildings and enveloped the entire hill," they are thrust into their memories of childhood where the sound occurs in a different time and space (24). These childhood memories are described through sound and touch, which replaces the sensory overload of vision associated with pain and suffering and articulated through the medical instrument in the image of needles.

The narrator describes childhood as "[a] taste that came back with ease and then disappeared rapidly, leaving us astonished, bewildered by the immense adult bodies here before us" (25). He locates the memory of being a child within the body of all the patients of Dayr al-Salib, which destabilizes the

dichotomy of individual and collective and collapses the present into the past. This desire for escape through a collective body (re)placed in childhood operates similarly to Georgis' description of queer affects as "an interruption" to the social symbolic (15). The narrator here assimilates himself and other patients into a marginalized collective body and an authorial "we" in an escape from reality through memory. The surprise that accompanies the collective separation and realignment into individual adult bodies reveals a moment of de-historicized bodily transformation, simultaneously evoking and destabilizing the boundary between childhood and adulthood. The narrator articulates the sensory experience of memory wandering and return to the present as a collective moment of movement that identifies his and the other patients' bodies as "weak and submissive" and "difficult to master and tame, to adopt as our own" (Barakat and Booth 25).

Once the narrator is realigned in his adult body, he disengages from the collective "we," taking up the singular "I." This transition is an intentional distancing from the collective body of patients towards occupying a position outside of submissiveness. The narrator declares that "I want to forget them, forget how much like them I am. To forget that my body is entangled in theirs, how my body loses itself among their bodies, loses itself in their multitude" (Barakat and Booth 25). At the end of the chapter, the narrator describes this "multitude" of patients as Christ's sheep whose "flawed and faulty forms" result in their exclusion and abjection (Barakat and Booth 26). Al-Samman connects this paradigm of shepherd/shepherded to "God, father, and the ruler," and suggests that Barakat "exposes the danger of such an association, and of venerating the divine, when she represents God as one who is partial to the strong majority against the dispossessed asylum minority" (183-4). Yet, the patients' marginality is also protective: Dayr al-Salib imparts to the patients a civilianhood made otherwise impossible in the context of the Civil War. Within the bounds of this institution, they have become "the last civilians, the only civilians, for [they] no longer have the wherewithal to bear arms, and [they] never will" (Barakat and Booth 113).

The collective of subjugated patients is also identified by its exclusion from reality: the patients' living bodies no longer warrant their participation in life (Barakat and Booth 65). In another instance of his identification with a collective "we" the narrator points out the gender segregation of patients and the discomfort that Dayr al-Salib's staff exhibit when patients touch their bodies in a sexual manner. The patients' sexuality is denied based on their exclusion from the gendered roles of the war. This exclusion positions the patients' desire outside of a social symbolic marked by winning or losing, and bases their desire for a sexual encounter on "pure play" instead. The narrator says,

We do not understand why they cannot seem to realize how lonely our bodies are, how severed and alone, or to see that our desire—if it wells up at all—is nothing but a game. It's a matter of pure play that does not distinguish losing from winning, a beginning from an end. Perhaps because we have lost our sense of even the most elementary features of our bodies, we are like people who have a toy that is incomplete (114).

The suspension of desire's culmination in either a position of domination or submission escapes the conception of the sexual encounter as necessarily constituted through power dynamics. This "pure play"

also goes against the notion of masculinity that Evelyn Accad points to in the context of the Civil War. In “An Occulted Aspect of the War in Lebanon,” Accad teases out the relationship between violence and sex that materializes in rape. She suggests that violence is constitutive of masculinity, and that rape became the site of experimentation and fulfillment of domination in the context of the Civil War. The narrator’s description of “pure play” as inattentive to time markers also aligns with Georgis’ notion of queer affects as “suspend[ing] knowable or teleological time and unhing[ing] proper boundaries and habitual social relationalities in the interest of carnality” (15). The patients are denied exhibitions of their sexuality because their desires “stir up feelings of fear, almost, or disgust” in the nurses (Barakat and Booth 114). Further, the patients’ desires are positioned outside of socially-constituted relations marked by tribal belonging, as their desires do not emerge from an “inheritance” of the phallus as a marker of masculinity to be offered to women (114). The patients’ bodies and desires are therefore made abject, which renders Barakat’s description of “pure play” a queer site of affective abjection.

The Narrator & The Beloved: The Woman Inside

Ghenwa Hayek cogently observes that amnesia has rendered the main character both narrator and audience, both subject and object of his story, as other characters have to remind him of the events that happened to him (65). This simultaneity of subject and object highlights the difficult positioning that the narrator embodies. Moneera al-Ghadeer also points to the narrator’s ambiguity and duality, noting that while he is unreliable at times, he is “self-conscious, insightful, and wiser than the sane” at others (116). In one memory, the narrator fights with his beloved, belittling her autonomous desire to find work and leave the house. He then admits his own duplicity as a speaker. He refuses to budge from his intentional inconsistency: “[t]oday I might well tell you something different, something that contradicts what I said yesterday. This, you see, is my ballad, my soul’s will to wander and search, to explore the pain of contradictions” (Barakat and Booth 77). He perceives the conversation as possessing a “shade of competition to it, of struggle, of premeditated murder” (Barakat and Booth 76).

The narrator’s description of conversation sits in contrast to the description of his own voice. He addresses himself, saying:

No one hears the lyrics of your voice. No one listens to the music of your larynx or notices the rings of sound your throat makes, ripping outward to spread like flat loaves of bread above you in the sky. No one listens to the lilting sinuousness of your voice as it rises from your windpipe or the bronchi of your lungs, from your dry lips or your trembling palate (76).

This association of voice with music underscores the gap between the body’s production of sound and the audience’s reception of meaning. The narrator’s lament of his disconnection emerges from anticipating an audience’s (re)construction of “signs,” which leads to his production as a speaking subject. The narrator admits his dishonest performance in the socially-constructed conversation, yet he also favors nature, quite literally, by retracing the movement of language from the body and emphasizing the reception of sound

over meaning. As Georgis notes, “coming into selfhood through language” functions at the expense of pleasure, which is replaced by the social ties constituted by the social symbolic (14). Pleasure here is implied in “lyrics,” “music,” “ilting sinuousness,” and the poetic images of the rings, loaves of bread, and the body’s anatomy (Barakat and Booth 76). For the narrator, meaning resides in voice rather than in “the lucidity that words produce” (Barakat and Booth 75).

The notion of the narrator’s ambiguity and the simultaneity of subject and object positions makes possible a queer turn that examines the relation between the narrator and the beloved. The duality of the woman’s character functions through the tension between her emergence as the subject and object of the narrator’s desire and storyline. Throughout the novel, the beloved’s position is elusive and shifting: she overlaps with, is positioned against, or is assimilated into the narrator. The beloved’s uncertain residence within the narrator’s memory destabilizes the narrative arch, as her characterization is contingent upon her differentiation within and from the narrator’s self and memory. In the epilogue, the narrator admits that “[p]erhaps the woman I used to see standing in a circle of sunlight, sitting motionless in the garden below my window, never did exist” (Barakat and Booth 135). Though her character is possibly a “real” beloved kidnapped by the narrator, her overlap with the narrator’s position as an unnamed, kidnapped victim belies her existence as “real.” After he killed his beloved, the narrator meets two men who kidnap and torture him. In the scene of his capture, the narrator becomes a witness to the beating of his body. He says:

This was me, in pain; but it wasn’t me. It was my body in pain; but it was not my body. It felt as though I were a mere spectator. And it felt as though I had two bodies. Not like the two bodies I used to have, bodies that kept me in agony when they split and drew apart and then again as they came together. Two bodies, but two *other* bodies. Different ones (Barakat and Booth 17).

His body is revealed as doubled and quadrupled: he witnesses his torture in two bodies that are not the two he had before. The narrator reveals his bodily duality as predating his capture and as constitutive of his character, which complicates an attribution of multiple bodies to a dissociation caused by trauma.

Hayek reads the narrator’s internalization of the violence he experienced during his kidnapping and torture as enacted through a “fantasy” of murder that culminates in the “reunification of his divided soul and body” (65). The opening chapter of the novel presents this reunification as an incorporation of the beloved’s soul into the narrator, as giving birth to the self, giving the self to nature, and as a simile to the ascension of the body of Christ (Barakat and Booth 2). While Hayek’s observation holds, reunification is complicated by the incorporation of the beloved into the narrator, which suggests that she is rendered a part of his “divided soul and body.” Further, in many instances, the narrator reveals his division to go beyond a duality of soul and body to a multiplication of bodies.

The imbricated narratives of kidnapper and kidnapped gesture to the socially-constructed incapability of the narrator’s excessively “masculine” body to accommodate more than one gender. He longs for his sexual desire for the beloved to culminate in a merging into a female body or a return to an unsexed body. These moments run counter to a normative notion of coherent maleness and masculinity. Allen Hibbard and

Michelle Hartman have also observed the narrator's contemplation of androgyny in the novel (134, 100). For instance, the narrator admires Um Kalthoum's simultaneously "asexual" and "bisexual" voice that "encompasses more than one sex" and is heard by men as a woman's and by women as a man's (Barakat and Booth 64). For the narrator, Um Kalthoum embodies the potential of gender fluidity, of being heard and read as either gender depending on the desire of the other. This moment potentially complicates the narrator's contemplation of conversation, shedding light on his struggle not only with his audience's reconstruction of signs, but also in his possible gendering as a speaking subject.

By contrast, in other instances in the novel, the narrator points to the disappearing of his body or a sense of emptiness, loss, or felt absence. The origin of a separately embodied beloved cannot be fixed in time and space in the narrative: the novel opens with her murder and ends on an uncertainty about her death and existence. The narrator gestures towards various trajectories that could define her, admitting that "[p]erhaps [he] composed her from the parts of many women [he has] known, in an attempt to fill the emptiness in [his] body with desire" (Barakat and Booth 135). In this sense, the woman is narratively produced without a fixed position outside her presence in the window and in memory—she is both separately embodied and not. She is repetitively escaping, literally and figuratively, through the narrator's boundaries.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed notes that "[n]aming emotions often involves differentiating between the subject and object of feeling" (13). The woman in the narrator's mind occupies various positions of subject and object of love, and there is an ambiguity surrounding her presence within the narrator's memory. Barakat writes:

I'm confused about where to place that woman inside of me, when she is there, just like that, motionless in front of the window. Where do I put her, inside of me, where to make a place just for her? Does she belong inside the happiness or inside the sadness? Inside what I can remember or inside what I have forgotten? Does she go with the longing or with the irritation? With the yearning or with the boredom of repetition? Her repetition, hers, the repeating of her inside of me (27-8).

The setting here shows the narrator at the window, both a reflective surface and a transparent boundary. Barakat's language positions the woman inside the speaker, a presence that demands categorization by placing her as contingent upon these aligned and contradictory feelings. The need for situating this woman's presence in an emotion operates as a threshold into gendered, embodied characterization. The outer space of the window and the space of the narrator's mind align and collapse: both are thresholds of seeing and becoming. The narrator meditates on setting up a space for the woman to differentiate her from others, a space to subjectify and/or objectify her within a story. The woman is both a part of the speaker and about to become an embodied other.

Elsewhere, the narrator articulates a paradoxical absence and presence of the beloved through a series of metaphors of incompleteness that culminate in "[a] breast without a woman, without its trembling eruption under my hand" (85). This metaphor is extended to the narrator's positioning as a "nursing mother" and his beloved as her "milk" (85). He says:

Like milk, this woman rises in me. Like the milk that rises in the breasts of a nursing mother and spots her garment, her absence rises in me. I search feverishly, looking perhaps for her breast—without her—because I've known, since she left me the first time, that she will not return, she will no longer be. And in her breast's ultimate absence, her hot milk rises in me, gushing from my hands, from my head (Barakat and Booth 85).

Barakat's metaphorical language transcends the bodily boundaries of the narrator and the beloved. The narrator's beloved is articulated as a missing part of his body, manifested by the lack of a bodily secretion. The metaphor transgresses the normative assumption of the narrator's "maleness," as the absence of her sexed body inverts the sexing of his own body. Moreover, he suggests that her very being is contingent on her "return."

Winckler reads the character's madness and suffering as originating from the irreconcilable gap between lovers that renders their union impossible, a literary trope that evokes the Freudian notion of identification. According to Ahmed, identification is an "active form of loving" that aims to erase difference in the future (126). The erasure of difference, however, relies on destroying the boundaries of self and other that constitute desire in the first place (Ahmed 126). Killing the beloved and "breathing her soul" is the narrator's extreme erasure of difference, a violent resolution to bridging the gap between them (Barakat and Booth 2). This assimilation of the beloved is therefore layered within a Sufi transcendence from materiality and the association with a Christ-like resurrection and ascension.

Al-Samman notes in her reading of Barakat's work that "[t]he characters' desire to transgress ...dualities, to reside in the generative liminal space of the in-between, simultaneously authors their suffering and their salvation" (186). Salvation, achieved either by the murder of the beloved or by being with her, is presented as the resolution to the narrator's suffering. Yet, his suffering is expressed as a result of his desire for the beloved and his anticipation of her leaving. This simultaneity of suffering and salvation is complicated by the merging and blurring of the characters and their bodies. In the case of murder, the narrator assimilates the beloved's soul into his self, whereas in having sex, their bodies are rendered invisible. Considering that the beloved is Muslim and he Christian, this paradigm of suffering/salvation feeds into the vengeful cycle of sectarian violence. Therefore salvation and suffering are paradoxically intertwined, expressed through violence and sex and constituted by the gaps and overlaps in the narrator's desire and embodiment.

Though identification may be read in moments where the narrator is contemplating the trajectory of his relationship with his beloved, I suggest that there is a queer moment for which identification does not account. Meditating on the passage of time that "sanitizes" the sex of older bodies, the narrator says: "And so we will grow to look alike. We will come to have a single body and a single sex, not two. I will bring back her sex, take it upon myself, and bend myself to it. And that will prove my salvation" (Barakat and Booth 49). In this moment, identification operates spatially by "expanding the space of the subject" in a paradoxical attempt to "make likeness" by seeking to "undo the very distinction [identification] requires" (Ahmed 126). Yet, Barakat evokes the preexistence of the sexed body through the use of the word "back"

(Barakat and Booth 49). In this moment, a desire for an embodied return to a female body is constitutive of the futuristic desire for the beloved. The bodies multiply to three in an attempt to achieve unity, and a temporal paradox emerges as the narrator's desire in the future produces a differently sexed body from the past. Further, salvation in this moment gestures to both normative and non-normative meanings. In a normative sense, becoming female might temper the vulnerability the narrator experiences as a male who has not taken up arms and therefore lost his "manhood," a privileged position in his sectarian community. In a non-normative sense, salvation perhaps implies the settlement of the narrator into a body he identifies with, culminating in coherence of body and sex.

When the narrator attempts to pinpoint the origin of his desire for the beloved, he neither focuses on her character nor on his relation with her. Rather, he retreats into his own body and his articulation of sex, gender, and desire collapse into each other:

But as for me: I do remember. I remember the grounds of my passion for her, at the very beginnings of my emergence into life as a tiny embryo in its first months when all of my chromosomes were still female, still XX, before the Y chromosome entered me in my final months of life in my mother's belly and transformed me into a male. Even as a male I swam in the waters of the female womb, and my maleness could not be assumed. I remember what came before my lethal struggle to be a man, before my birth and after it, and then after I reached puberty. But she forgets.

I am the loser, and she forgets that her soul is not elsewhere (82).

Barakat renders this moment a shedding of the narrator's coherent gender and sex, a moment that uncovers the threshold of the body's becoming. The origin of the narrator's existence and his desire for the beloved are intertwined: he places the woman simultaneously in the realms of his unsexed existence and sexuality. The "grounds" of his desire are located in the memory of his female origin, an embodiment that lacks an assumption of maleness. This moment disturbs the normative assumption that heterosexuality emerges from an attraction to difference in sex or gender. Ultimately, the origin of the desire for the beloved seeks to reach the preborn, presocial, and unsexed body of the narrator. Desire for the beloved conjures the female inside the narrator; she is doubled as a part of his interiority. Yet, whether she "forgets" the origin of her desire for the narrator or the narrator's "struggle to be a man," her soul resides within his body, and the spaces of desire and gender merge and move into each other in this moment.

This moment may be read as a complication of Butler's claim that localizing the cause of desire within the self discursively erases the "disciplinary practices" that generate gender, displacing it "onto a psychological 'core' [that] precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject" (173-4). Here, the narrator simultaneously displaces *and* acknowledges disciplinary practices in regards to constructs of desire and gender. He expresses the distinctions between his self and his sexed body in relation to the origin of his desire, revealing that sexing bodies is formulated through assumptions. His "lethal struggle to be a man" is a recognition of the performative process to approximate an ideal gendered construct. By positioning the beloved in a deep interiority that emerges from an ineffably unsexed body, he also

destabilizes a reading of her character solely as an object of love. Yet, this positioning also allows the narrator to dismiss her claims of his oppressive objectification. The narrator recognizes the disciplining of his embodiment through assumptions, and escapes it through desire, but he overlooks his patriarchy and objectification of the beloved.

At a fundamentally normative level, the credibility of the narrator's masculinity is in question because his presence in Dayr al-Salib means that he is not fighting alongside the militia. Hayek, for instance, reads the narrator as "emasculated" by the gender roles of the war that exclude unarmed men from participating in a gendered sexuality (65). And as Mona Fayad notes in her review of *The Laughing Stone*, "Barakat presents the war situation as one where gender identity is rigidly overdetermined, where participation in the community through fighting is the basic touchstone of masculine identity, and where dedication to an ethnic group is measured by one's willingness to sacrifice oneself in battle" (163). This notion of the sexual emasculation of non-militia men occurs throughout the novel, and is portrayed by characters inside and outside Dayr al-Salib, such as in the narrator's recollections of his friend Samaan, his conversation with fellow patient and friend Jabir, the nurses' taunting of him, or his interaction with soldiers at the border.

Whether a (re)production of otherness in/for violence and death or the biological reproduction of pregnancy, a gendered, polar economy of reproduction in war emerges in the background when the narrator resists the beloved's accusation of his objectification of her. He exclaims:

She had barred all exits in front of me, and so I made no response, for I could see the coming loss, resplendent in its clarity. It was the loss attendant upon her calculation that her body was elsewhere; that it was her possession alone and that with fierce concentration she could sequester and deny it; and that she would use it against me to separate her own self from it thoroughly, tossing it into the profusion of bodies, others' bodies, indistinguishable, bodies used to wage war and to increase the population (Barakat 78-9).

By lamenting the loss of the boundary between the couple and all "other bodies," the narrator conjures society's gendered roles in the context of war. He refuses to believe that his beloved's soul does not reside in her body, which is how he interprets her feelings and expression of autonomy. The boundary he draws between himself, his beloved, and all others is disturbed by his beloved's claim that he "holds all women in contempt" (78). Because the beloved identifies herself through a gendered collective as she challenges him, the narrator's trust in his differentiation of her from other women is shaken. He describes his reaction to her confrontation in terms of territorial competition and withdrawal. He "retreats" and purposefully alters his behavior by adopting gestures that he believes her to want:

I set about making her believe that I felt a need to speak to her, to talk with her, and that every word she said bore a profound importance that required deep listening, comprehension, and comment. I began to comply with criteria I had formulated for this urgent situation. I gauged precisely how soon I must contradict her flow of words if my listening pose was to appear genuine (Barakat and Booth 79).

The narrator's adoption of differently gendered behavior attempts to approximate and take on his own perception of her gendered self, which he assumes to be her desire. The performance that he engages in for the assumed benefit of his beloved culminates in resentment, aggression, and violence. In fact, the narrator's turning point towards violence in their relationship is marked by the dissolution of her distinctiveness from other women.

I concede with critics who suggest that the war (re)produces rigid gender roles that associate masculinity with death. Because the war's violence is directed at bodies differentiated by gender, sect, and location, the spaces of vulnerability occupied by the narrator are remodeled in his memory: they expand, collapse, and merge. Barakat's narrator is primarily engaged in a navigation of relations, exposing the processes through which his position(s) outside of collectivity and society materialize through differentiation. His rejection of society and a sectarian collectivity therefore speaks to a failure to inhabit the gendered spaces delineated by a society at war, which heightens the narrator's vulnerability.

The difficulty of a singular positioning of characters in *Disciples of Passion* is created by the narrative's navigation, establishment, and collapse of boundaries and by its discontinuity. Queer affects are made legible by the memory-generated narrative, revealing the narrator's sexual desire as intertwined with a desire for a preborn, presocial, unsexed body. The narrator's killing of the woman and his subsequent (re)construction of her through memory cannot be pulled apart from his struggle to approximate gendered ideals of desire and embodiment. It is only through her materialization into a body that murdering her becomes possible in the first place. She is characterized through her presence within the overlapping and collapsing spaces of desire and violence, suffering and salvation, and gender, sex, and embodiment. Her characterization reveals, defies, and succumbs to social constructs. The woman's characterization is more reflective of the narrator than it actually is of her self: the window in which she dwells possibly mirrors his own face and body.

Finally, I suggest that privileging a singular interpretation of the narrator and the beloved would be a misreading of the openness of Barakat's novel. Therefore, I hesitate to suggest imparting a specific identity onto the narrator, as that goes against Barakat's narrative techniques that create and encompass multiplicities. Yet, I suggest that the relationship between desire and embodiment is intricately woven in this novel, creating opportunities to read queer affects that characterize the narrator outside of normative assumptions and constructs of heterosexuality, maleness, and masculinity.

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