



## **Torrid Love or Classist Violence?**

Complicity with Narratives of Discrimination  
in The Smell of Cinnamon

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**Roula works on issyes related to labor, immigration, and gender. She dreams of one day dubbing children’s preograms. She write sometimes, and lives in a state of existential crisis always.**

Writing could be a reductionist activity, as it revolves around the modelling of reality, desires, and individual and societal needs through a linguistic medium. Writing could also be an exercise of imagination and creation, through which we document lives and create legendary heroes out of ordinary people. Through writing, we could also seek revenge against enemies: shrink them and render them into nothing. We could strip them of their humanity or give them the gift of flying. Writing has the power to do all that. It could allow us to find traces of ourselves, pressed between the pages of history, or imagine ourselves in the future. It could also erase us completely, as if we have never existed: queer, rural, migrant women, sex workers, transwomen, domestic workers, women of color, brown, and black women. Except for a few texts, which never gained international fame, we have been ignored and erased. Until the day came, when politics of representation forced our inclusion; they sprinkled us into the stories, like spices on a dish, or like secondary characters that help fulfill the fate of the main protagonist in its incongruity with ours. For the ends justify the means, and there is no harm in including our incidental roles should they serve the purpose of developing the main character. Thus, non- normative characters made their way into the public sphere mostly narrated in the languages of the Global North.

But we do not settle for these crumbs. As queer, trans, impoverished, racialized, migrant, refugee women and women from the Global South, we look for our stories between library shelves and the lines of prose and poetry produced in our countries. We search for them to find ourselves, to know that we have a heritage and history archived in Arabic, tracing the stories of our regions replete with intimacy. We look for them in ink on paper, as the stories of our ancestors, or our oral history, is often not as valorized within the status quo as the written word is. Instead, oral history is dismissed as gossip, or “hens’ talk”. We search for legitimacy, for “evidence” or “proof” —something women have always been asked to present, as the burden of proof always falls on the shoulders of those who have the least amount of power, as if the absence of evidence is not enough evidence of historical disempowerment and silencing. While searching for ourselves in the faces of protagonists written by pens held like magnifying glasses on our lives, we often find a stealthy and voyeuristic

desire to “uncover the hidden” or to express “daring and boldness” of writers who self-Orientalize as a “saviors” when checking all of the identity boxes for the sake of “diversity” in writing. Oftentimes, these identity boxes hold no importance to us. We then look for run-away images of characters that flee and defy the hegemonic norms, for they might, albeit barely, alleviate some of the representational injustice inflicted upon us. And we hope to find the said characters written by women.

For the purpose of writing for this issue, I searched for women who loved women, whether in public pronouncement or in secret, and who left written traces of their relationships. I found *The Smell of Cinnamon* by Samar Yazbek<sup>1</sup> on every list of queer novels from the region, as if it was a classic. It was celebrated after publication for allowing readers into “closed worlds forbidden from publicity,” at least according to the blurb on its cover and the literary reviews that embraced its queerness and presumed non-conforming to norms. I picked up the book and read the words of the blurb more carefully: the novel was about “the relationship between a *lady* from Damascus and her *maid*” where “the relationship transforms into a game deftly played by the maid, as it becomes her only way to recover her lost humanity.” I reread the sentence and it reeked of a smell: not that of cinnamon, but of nauseating rot. I was not hastily “judging a book by its cover.” Rather, the marketing blurb relied on the power narrative: a bourgeoisie “lady” has sex with her «maid” and feels either proud or victimized that the latter has become imbued with presumed humanity.

Sometimes writing that describes sex between women is crude and explicit, or “bold,” as some progressives like to call it, when, in reality, it is merely a shallow contribution to the objectification of women’s desires for male readers, who imagine our bodies and feelings as vessels for satisfying their voyeurism. And if these texts do not satisfy the gaze of the reader, then they would appal those deeming queer relationships as illegitimate, all while validating that these connections end in destruction, death, or insanity. It is as if the writer is declaring that no space exists for queer women in novels’ pages, nor is there one for them in real life

1 Samar Yazbek is a Syrian writer and journalist .She was born in Jableh ,Syria ,in ,1970 and studied Arabic literature at Latakia university .She has written in a wide variety of genres - novels ,short stories ,film scripts ,television dramas ,film and TV criticism ,literary narratives.

and in our societies. Exploitative queer relationships exist, and so does rape among women. Crude sex that entertains voyeurs more than it satisfies the women engaging in it exist, and so do platonic ass-rubs. Sex among women can be corny, nauseating, desired but unspoken or refrained from. Everything exists in queer relationships, for this review is not an attempt to revindicate them. What is unfair, however, is that it is only this sex that exists in the minds of writers, and nothing else.

*The Smell of Cinnamon* is no different. Its fame stems from its main premise: a love story between a *lady* and her *maid*. The novel was acclaimed for its bravery of explicit portrayal of the events happening in the closeted lesbian world of Damascus. Reviews admire that the writer depicts this world “without shame.”. However, the shame, which lack the reviews celebrate, is imputed to the visibilizing of “lesbian love” and the *maid’s exploitation* of her employer. It is not the shame of trivializing sexual and economic violence by cloaking it in marketable lesbianism, a shame we need to feel. It is not the shame that we ought to feel towards proposing ideas such as “reverse exploitation,” similar to “reverse racism,” misandry as opposed to misogyny, or other types of nonsense. ***“Who was Alia? Was she really her maid? Who was she? She knew who the lady of the house was, and she doesn’t remember when they exchanged roles.”*** The book pushes us to examine the wrong questions, because wrong questions do exist in spite of the efforts of political correctness.

Samar Yazbik is undoubtedly a master of her craft. She is adept at depicting the most intricate voyeuristic moments in both low-income and bourgeois environments. Her knowledge of the contextual details of the history of the neighborhoods in Damascus is enormous. She is, undoubtedly, a linguistic titan. Her characters are also complex and multi-layered, and her writing is engaging. The only doubt there is in her ability to give each character their due when it comes to depicting relationships between women. The criticism here centers her depiction of an exploitative relationship between a woman-employer and her domestic worker as queer love.

This delusional love takes place between Hanan el-Hashimi, a wealthy middle-aged woman from Damascus, and Alia, whose last name we never learn for she is a nobody

whom Hanan purchases to put in her service. As if it isn't appalling enough, their presumed love is framed as one-sided, a love in which Hanan receives the shorter end of the stick. The novel, peripherally, notes that one of the two "lovers" bought the other from her father when she was a child, as if from a slave market or trafficking endeavor. The novel glosses over these events and tells the reader that Alia now exploits her mistress to obtain her "humanity". It is made implicit, from the book and the blurb on its cover, that there is no way for Alia to obtain the said humanity except through having sex with her mistress. This implicit notion is purely classist. It is similar to the patriarchal premise that men who take part in "corrective rape" subscribe to, when they boast about curing lesbians through the magic powers of their dicks. Alia lacks humanity, apparently, and Hanan el-Hashmi's body is a boat that carries her over to it or a vessel through which her humanity is shaped.

There is an evident Bourgeois bias: the book endorses the idea that sex with the rich(er) and high(er) classes is a form of class infiltration and social mobility toward a better life. If only such "better life" was translated into a bottomless bank account or a buldging wallet, it would have been a clear transaction in which material–sexual toil would be exchanged for material–financial return. But the rich classes consider sex with them in and of itself to be an adequate reward, one that transports us from our marginalized existence to a place where we receive "emotional" sufficiency and pleasures that satisfy our lacking souls and characters. In this sense, we derive our "humanity" from the dicks and pussies of the bourgeoisie.

Alia's character is dressed up as Cinderella. The novel goes on to convince us that Alia magically transforms into a queen at night, only to turn back into a maid at the crack of dawn (p. 17). But this is not a fairytale in which the good fairy Hanan and the poor maid Alia, share a night of festivities and celebration before reality takes its course. So, «**Who is Alia? Is she really her servant?**» Hanan al-Hashmi asks many times, as if she is enlisting the help of the reader in thinking of a solution to this puzzling dilemma. The answer is clear, however: Alia really is her maid. An domestic worker forcefully trapped in illiteracy and the private sphere: a fate imposed on her by her employers as Alia was forbidden from leaving

the house and from reading books (P. 29). The opposite would have been inappropriate for a maid. After years of working for Hanan, Alia realized that she only had service clothes: she **“only had blue jeans and a white shirt. Other than that, all the clothes stuffed in her locker were for sleeping or working at home”** (P. 30). This comes as no surprise because the employer confined Alia to domestic and sexual service.

When she was a child, Alia did not allow the boys in her impoverished neighborhood to «rub her ass.” She lived in Al-Raml neighborhood, where opportunities for the oppression of women and children were rife. She was aware of what sex and rape are, seeing as she stabbed the rapist her paralyzed older sister and her own rapist when she was 10 years old. I will not assume that she was a rash or clueless child when Hanan bought her. She was instead very sharp. Life has taught her all forms of self-defense, as escaped many sexual assaults as a child living in the dumpsters. However, she was not spared the evils of Hanan al-Hashimi and her husband Anwar, the **«decadent crocodile.»** I do not assume that Alia was blindly led toward sex, nor was she **“fascinated by [the] magical worlds»** hiding inside her employer’s vagina. Rather I believe she was led to all this knowingly. However, her knowledge did not necessarily help her survive nor wield power. For “knowledge is [not] power” if you do not possess power itself. This is what men, like Francis Bacon to whom the quote belongs, did not know. Nor did Friedrich Nietzsche know that as he thought his existence derived from his thinking. These men lived their lives against historical materialist arguments, forgetting their privileges and believing they obtained them through their own merit; that their thinking is a product of their genius rather than our shared experiences and our different positionalities. They thought that their intellectual authority translates into matter, that their ideas precede matter. It escaped them that their own material privileges empowered them to spread their ideas. Knowledge is not power, then, in the absence of power itself, despite liberalism’s tireless effort to convince us to pull ourselves from our bootstraps. It tells us that our intelligence will enable us to ace capitalism and lead decent lives, and that our failure is the result of our inaction and stupidity, or that education will save us from sexual exploitation unlike illiterate girls, as per Taha Hussein’s morale in *The Nightingale’s*

*Prayer.*

Knowledge may help us anticipate the tragedies that will strike us. It may allow us an escape; seconds to close our eyes to not see the catastrophes. It can help us absorb the bitterness and push through so we do not break. That is all. We do what we must do, what our context allows: we protect ourselves, our resources, or our families. We are abused, and we do not report it. Or we are raped, and we hold our silence. We are not to blame, and there should be no pretense that knowledge could protect us from all of this. The fact that Alia did not stab Hanan al-Hashimi when the latter led the *maid*'s fingers «**to where she wanted**», in the bathtub, and when she played with her body and forcibly kissed her, then kicked her out when she was done, is not evidence of Alia falling into a torrid and passionate love with her employer, which the novel tries hard to convince us of.

It is possible that Alia is attracted to women. It is probable that she enjoys having sex with her employer, but that does not automatically make their sex consensual. Survivors often report that, in some cases, their bodies unwillingly respond to sexual stimulus when raped, which creates a dissonance between what and how they feel. They doubt their sanity and feel ashamed to speak that what happened to them was not consensual. In Alia's case, the power dynamic is not in her favor, and she knows very well that «**all she has to do is simple: obey**» (p. 44).

Consequently, it is insulting, at best, that this relationship is portrayed as a "game" that is being played by the young domestic worker. Worse, it legitimizes violence. Alia escaped the streets, but not the household, because the streets, despite their cruelty to women, queer, and impoverished people, is safer for her than the home of her employers. The private space in which we seek safety is oftentimes the most dangerous place for us.

Hanan al-Hashmi's obsession with Alia is condescending and coming from a place of superiority. She thinks that Alia's headscarf is attractive, for it makes her into the cliché of the unwrapped candy, un-feathered chicken, or an intact watermelon. Hanan unwraps her candy, however, because she is too progressive to want a veiled child maid. However, Hanan herself appears to wear some sort of a head cover, but it holds different symbolism.

Hanan finds Alia's hijab to be exotic, while her head cover is normal, not drool-inducing. Sometimes she tells us that Alia's face is «**sculpted more precisely and more beautifully than what is necessary for a maid.**» She also tells the reader that she admires the look in her eyes, in its difference from the normal servants' gaze: «**ranging between dull sadness and patient grief.**» Other times, she describes her as dark-skinned, skinny, a slut, and «**an ugly beggar**» (p. 14). In the end, she is a «**servant with no name or family**» (P. 21). All these comparisons are drawn between Alia and Hanan, the maid's vessel towards a lost humanity.

«**The abrupt taste of betrayal**» overwhelms Hanan al-Hashimi when she catches Alia red-handed giving a hand job to the «**decadent crocodile.**» She tries to persuade the reader, in her long monologues, that Alia betrayed her and their love. Fact of the matter being that Alia is «**an ugly beggar,**» both the knowledgeable narrator and Hanan believe that the domestic worker must have seduced the animal. If his tiny excuse of a cock does not erect out of a desire for his wife, then how would it for an ugly maid, except if she had exercised her cunning in every way possible in order to get the flaccid piece of meat of this old geezer to stand erect?

The novel really does pose genius questions, as if there is no other possible explanation to the unfolding events, except for a passing mention of Alia mumbling an old adage her mother used to tell her as she was being fired: «**Better any man than no man at all.**» That man, Anwar, heavily hovered around her chest, like his wife, yet they both believed themselves to be innocent.

While the novel imbues Hanan and Alia's relationship with contrived romance and alleged love, all lesbian sex/relationships, in the novel, fall under one of two categories: either «burning passion» if characters belong to the same socio-economic class, or «disposable» if they do not.

Hanan summarizes her relationship with Alia, after a vicious cycle of deluding the reader into believing there were romantic feelings between them, when she says to herself: «**They are just fingers. I can replace them with others**» (p. 22). With this she returns Alia to her realistic place, where the working class is exploited and reminded daily of its dispos



ability. This story is not about women who love women, but women who take advantage of other women. Anwar is not the only “**decadent crocodile**” in this plot. Hanan could give him a run for his money.

In the act of writing fiction, writers often elude questioning, on the basis that they are often implicitly assumed to be neutral in relaying a story and therefore unaccountable of their literary choices because art does not require justifications. Art is hence assumed to convey a unique, singular experience of a person, and to not necessarily speak for everyone or make blanket statements. There are two reasons behind this assumption: creative writing as a leaway for a writer to impute the plot to a “muse” or an “inspiration” and realistic writing that delegates the responsibility of the writer’s words to their imputability to “the facts of life.” Both narratives of the freedom of inspiration or the confinement of realism are not only used to protect the writer from criticism, but they also disseminate political and societal values and force us into ready-made boxes, declaring one of two things: This is one unique experience, produced from the imagination of the writer, and they are not obliged to justify or represent the character in a non-normative manner, or this is a realistic experience that the author faithfully conveyed. So, «shush». The problem with *The Smell of Cinnamon* is not that it deals with characters or relationships that may be queer. On the contrary, we are not obliged, as queer, impoverished people, or people of color, to produce innocent and sanitized love narratives that are palatable to the public taste and are free from violence, exploitation, and heroism. It is not only possible but necessary to write about exploitative queer relationships. The problem here is two-fold: the way *The Smell of Cinnamon* frames an exploitative relationship as a torrid love story, and that the novel is celebrated as a liberating book. What is worse is that it is considered a queer-friendly book depicting our worlds. The critique is simple: a text that does not liberate us is not liberating.