

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

QUEER LEBANESE LITERATURE:  
VIOLENCE AND QUEERNESS IN KOOLAIDS AND  
BAREED MISTA3JIL

by  
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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
to the Department of English  
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon  
September 2021

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have received a great deal of support from family and friends.

I would first like to thank my advisor, supervisor, and friend, Professor Syrine Hout, whose expertise was invaluable in creating and guiding my writing. Your insightful feedback pushed me to sharpen my thinking and brought my work to a higher level. To Dr. Kathryn and Dr. Sara, your vigilance and constructive criticism has made this whole experience one to remember.

I would also like to thank my friends, Diyana Hawari, Joseph Ayoub, Cara Mourani, Lynn Abdelkader, and Layla Khoury, for their never-ending support, love, and patience. You provided me with everything I could need to make it through this experience despite all the negativity we went through.

Additionally, I would like to thank my mother for her constant support and motivation. You are always there for me, and I cannot begin to thank you enough for your sacrifices and love. Finally, I would like to thank my brother and sister, Joe and Thea, without whom this would not have been a completed work.

# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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for

Master of Arts

Major: English Literature

Title: Queer Lebanese Literature: Violence and Queerness in *Koolaid*s and *Bareed Mista3jil*

The presence of violence within the queer community is not unheard of, however, its use as a literary tool to queer characters is a more pressing topic. In this thesis, the use of violence by Rabih Alameddine in his debut novel, *Koolaid*s: *The Art of War*, is explored as a queering element that acts to erase the individual and unique narratives of the characters it is portraying. In contrast, Meem's, *Bareed Mista3jil*, introduces violence as secondary to the narratives and as a more supporting element. By exploring the different elements of both texts, including language, gender, religion, as well as a deep dive into violence and its forms, the thesis argues that the characters in *Koolaid*s are flat and unidimensional while the characters in *Bareed* are more well-rounded.

**Keywords:** Queer, Lebanese, *Koolaid*s, *Bareed Mista3jil*, Violence

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## CHAPTER I

### THE WEST, VIOLENCE, AND ARAB QUEERNESS

It is disheartening to go through life being told over and over again, by your family, school, society, that your entire existence is false. I have lived my life thinking that I was alone in feeling this way, so I reached out to books and television in hopes of finding someone like me, but all I found was the cursed *Majdi w Wajdi*, a television show segment which offered exaggerated parodies of stereotypical gay men as a means of entertainment for the masses by ridiculing queerness. Finding out about queer Arab characters in literature was a moment of respite after what seemed like an endless struggle. Finally, a person, their life, their experience, fictional or not, that I can relate to. I was wrong. Having spent the last few months living through a revolution, an economic collapse, a pandemic, an explosion, and a move to another country, I can safely say my sense of belonging to a queer community was askew; despite the presence of queerness everywhere, including in the revolution, friends, family; my ability to find a place of comfort which allowed me to be authentically queer was not so simply accessible. Working on this thesis has shown me that this is the case in literature as well. An upsetting trope is to be found in the works presenting queer Arab characters. One that focuses on an equation which many queer Arab people find inaccurate, that is that Arab queerness equals unhappiness, violence, demise, and disparity. In this thesis I take a close at two texts written by queer Lebanese authors about queer Lebanese characters and their lives. In exploring their narratives, I hope to further understand the way representations of these characters play into Lebanese queerness, what it means to be queer and Arab, specifically Lebanese, does geography matter, and what role does violence play in their narratives. By doing this I hope to shed light on the way these



characters were written to appease a western audience. I employ Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* to explore that point, as well as Connell's *Patriarchal Dividend*, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence*, literary trauma theory, as well as the works of many other scholars, to investigate the characters as they exist, how their narratives are told, and to what extent are they relevant and/or are representative of a true queer Lebanese experience.

It is important to explore the word queer and better define it within the context I aim to use it in this thesis. The word queer originated from the German word *quer* meaning oblique or perverse. During the 1920's the word evolved from its original meaning of weird to ill and became a pejorative reference to homosexuality because the behavior of those who were perceived as homosexuals was believed to be unnatural. In the 50's, queer had its meaning change again to be the equivalent of dyke or faggot, both offensive terms used to refer to homosexuals. Fortunately, the 90's introduced queer theory which was a movement to reclaim the word and establish it as subversive of the mainstream by having homosexuals use it as an identity marker, a sort of umbrella term to refer to homosexual individuals without the negative connotations society had associated with the word. It is interesting to note that this huge change to the discourse surrounding the word queer came about from academic sources before trickling down to the masses. Much like many ideologies or fields of study, queer theory has advanced many discourses at an exponential rate within the last two decades and encompasses many different analyses and opinions (Jagose, 15). Although queer theory is like any academic theory, constantly in motion and ever-changing, it is closely linked to Western concepts and experiences of queerness. To be able to join the "queer community" (this is also a phrase which I further explore below) there is a need to set

oneself apart from the mainstream and highlight the individualistic aspect of one's identity, specifically as seen by society and the "queer community." However, despite the wave of acceptance within the Western queer community of genders and sexualities beyond the cis-gendered homosexual, admission into the community was not always a given. Particularly, this is seen in the way trans\* individuals are to this day outsiders, racism runs rampant, gender roles are reinforced, and other criteria the community may deem un-homogenous. The best example is the widely used and self-explanatory phrase: no fat, no fem, no Asian.

Western queerness and the Western queer community are based on an 'infrastructure', a foundation of academics, theorists, and activists that have permitted an expedited and strong evolution of the community. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of representation in relation to queer people of colour, especially in the Middle East (Merabet, 1-10). There is a stark distinction between the experiences of queer people from the 'liberal' world and those from the developing countries, with noticeable regional distinctions, especially since homosexual and queer identity are not as clear-cut in these regions as they are in the West (Altman et al.; Dunne, 8).

This poses the question: do western standards of queerness liberate and validate the identity of the Arab queer individual, especially in an environment that lacks the infrastructure for such an accelerated growth; and how does this affect literature and the representation of Arab/Lebanese queerness in writing? By reading and analyzing Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaid: The Art of War* and Meem's *Bareed Mista3jil*, I argue that western influence and the presence of violence in these narratives simplify rather than complicate queer Arab/Lebanese stories. This creates unidimensional characters rather than the multi-dimensional people presented in reality, sidelining characters in their

own stories. In other words, I believe that Alameddine chooses to place violence center stage in his novel, *Koolaid's*, effectively estranging the queer narratives it is meant to portray, whereas *Bareed Mista3jil* has violence as characteristic not a character. If you take away the violence from these narratives, you also inadvertently take away the queerness, reifying the unidimensional approach to them. Conversely, one can also look at violence as a queering element within these narratives. Furthermore, these Western concepts of queerness and queering identity create more rigidity in identity formation and increase the stigma within the Arab queer community. One important comparison to flesh out the argument is that between the clashes of Western individualism and Arab communal and familial ties. I hope to tackle throughout this thesis the interactions between Western queer performativity and Arab queer identity.

## **A. Definitions**

First, I wish to set some definitions in place in order to properly create an easy-to-comprehend framework. The most important definition is that of the word queer. Despite the etymology relayed above, the word queer has reemerged into the limelight as a beacon to draw in any and all genders and sexually non-conforming individuals. Queer was used as a derogatory term to identify homosexual men, especially effeminate men, in the late 19th century; It connoted sexual deviance, along with terms such as fairy and faggot. (Robb, 262) However, the word was slowly reclaimed over time, with a new use for it emerging as an umbrella term to encompass any who identify/are gender and/or sexually non-conforming. Members of the community still find trouble with reclaiming the word, much like the word faggot or fairy, but for most, it has been adopted as the most apt identifier. It is within that spirit of inclusivity and commonality

that I use the word queer within this text, i.e., primarily as the umbrella term to identify anyone outside the categorization of a cis-gendered heterosexual individual. With that being said, I do acknowledge the setbacks of assuming queer is a rallying term, when in fact a queer experience is intersectional and as such cannot be universal across class, race, religion, etc. In other words, a queer community cannot ever be achieved because gender and/or sexuality cannot be clearly extracted and isolated from nationality, age, class, race, or perceived gender/assigned sex (i.e., male or female bodies being ascribed cis genders). This is further proven by our use of language. The conglomeration of culture, history, and social practices into a verbal communication tool we call language acts as a further layer of division and oppression. One example of this is language's primary role in reinforcing heteronormativity. As Adrienne Rich (1980) explains in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", heterosexuality is perceived as the norm, natural or intrinsic to human existence; however, this perception of heterosexuality works to erase queer existence. The way language finds its way to reinforce such perceptions can be through something as simple as a single word. Jessica King (2016) explores the complexities associated with language and queer expression in her article, "The Violence of Heteronormative Language Towards the Queer Community", particularly relating to the aforementioned. She highlights an important way to understand the ways through which the network of language, culture, and compulsory heterosexuality/heteronormativity associate with each other by diving into the language children are taught:

The cultural use of the word "appropriate" is violent in that it can delegitimize or stigmatize girls' feelings or desires, especially if those break with heteronormativity—for example, homosexual feelings or desires or a desire for sex that is considered uncharacteristic of someone performing femininity properly. Discussions of what is "appropriate" is closely related to slut-shaming, a form of

violence in which women who have a number of sexual partners deemed too high are mocked and degraded. (18)

Furthermore, King (2016) suggests that the cultural uses of such simple everyday words can be violent on an individual level but also has consequences on a political and social level, with effects reaching birth control and abortion. Returning to Adrienne Rich's text, we can then start to see how language supplements heteronormativity, arguably forcing queer erasure and the growth of anti-queer sentiments.

An important point to be made in regard to the above is the fact that all of this research is concerned with the English language. Whereas this can be informative and greatly influences my perceptions and understandings moving forward, it fails to account for Arabic (as well as other languages). However, similarities can be drawn and can feed into the way we as scholars read Arabic as a tool of heteronormativity within our own cultures. To that extent, we get a small glimpse of the ways in which Arabic fails at being inclusive, or more accurately how Arabic succeeds in silencing and alienating queer people and erasing their existence and ability to communicate: in Koolaid's and majorly in Bareed Mista3jil. I say majorly in Bareed Mista3jil because of the way the book came to be written in English despite being a collection of interviews conducted and transcribed in Arabic. I explore the effects of language as a barrier to queerness later in this thesis, particularly in relation to the theories presented below.

These points bring me to my next definition, Arab and Lebanese. In the upcoming pages, I explore the works of authors who have identified as queer Lebanese authors. In the context of this thesis, Lebanese will be assumed to mean anyone with a Lebanese lineage. I choose to focus on this definition of Lebanese so as to minimize the potential for clashing between notions about diaspora, expats, and nationals.

Another important definition, or rather distinction, concerns queer theory. The use of queer theory in this thesis is limited to exploring performativity and social experience and does not encapsulate the larger body of works within the discipline. I attempt to focus on Western queer ideologies and how they are involved in the shaping of Arab/Lebanese queerness, and how many western phenomena became an expectation for the validation of the queer identity for individuals mainly in the West, but also used as a ‘liberation tool’ for queer communities in the Arab world, and the Global South.

## **B. Theories**

Understanding the queer Lebanese individual is no easy task, even less so when taken out of the context of the real world and onto the pages of a book. However, one element remains regardless of context, namely the importance of accurate representation. As I explored briefly above, the queer Arab character has always found itself in the center of one form of violence or another. That is not to say that violence is unique to the queer population but rather that it is more often than not the only common characteristic which cuts across class, race, and gender. This in no way implies that violence is not intersectional, but rather that its representation in literature, vis-à-vis the queer Arab population, tends to be unidimensional. With that in mind, I bring forth the first theory I aim to use to help better elucidate this point: the spiral of silence theory.

### ***1. Spiral of Silence:***

First proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the spiral of silence theory stipulates those individuals will force themselves into silence out of fear of being isolated by their society; these individuals are the majority of the community. There also exists a vocal minority, in contrast to the silent majority, i.e., those who are not afraid of isolation or

are of a certain status untouched by isolation, usually those who are better educated or affluent. The existence of a silent majority is directly understood as the indirect formation of a public opinion. More aptly explained, if the majority of a society are silent about an issue, they are then inherently sanctifying it. A good example would be the maltreatment of domestic workers in Lebanon. Despite many organizations and individuals being vocal about it (vocal minority), the silent majority form the public opinion that is: there is nothing wrong with the current system. As Donsbach, Wolfgang, Salmon, and Tsfati state, “by proposing separate behavioral tendencies for those in the majority and those in the minority, the spiral of silence addresses the theoretical formation and maintenance of public opinion, as well as its subsequent impacts on different societal factions” (65). This particular sentence highlights an important aspect of the theory which I wish to zoom in on: “the impact(s) of silence on different societal factions,” namely queer individuals and women within these texts.

## ***2. Gay international:***

How do minorities, particularly queer individuals, exist in a society where silence is a basic means of survival; exploring this context allows me to further understand the underlying workings of the structure of violence which permeates identity and community in the Arab region. To clarify, how does the queer community in the Arab world, a silent existence in the larger sea of silence, act and react; how do queer people move from the silent majority into the vocal minority and what does that mean to the individual, to the queer community, and to the silent majority?

To answer these questions, I bring in the work of Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, to better understand the Arab context. In the first chapter, *Anxiety in Civilization*, Massad argues that:

Arab nationalist writings and debates from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concerned with cultural revival and modernization in response to colonialism and imperialism. They often harked back to putatively golden Arab and Muslim pasts but produced revisions, repressions, and narrations of these pasts that served the ideological and cultural purposes of different authors. Such selective readings were especially likely when modernists engaged with evidence of polymorphous sexual values and practices between men and boys in medieval literature. (53-4)

Simply put, the need to fit into a preconceived idea of what the middle east was forced an orientalist view of the past onto Arab writers and authors, effectively erasing any existence of a uniquely Arab experience. This meant the further erasure of queer Arabs who were, unlike the current queer Arab individuals, central to Arabness. A prime example of this is Abu Nawas, a queer Arab poet who wrote to male subjects exclusively. Another issue that this erasure presents is an indirect application of pressure to the Arabic language. By choosing to hide these pasts and histories, the Arabic language was basically stunted and disallowed from evolving. Language thus became a tool through which the spiral of silence operates, particularly Arabic, which is fraught with a lack of ability to talk about queer issues. This is especially interesting given that the characters in *Bareed Mista3jil* are primarily communicating in Arabic, with Koolaid's having a combination of Arabic and English because of its dual setting. *Bareed Mista3jil*, although written in English, is a work done in Arabic, including the interviews. Meem, one of the authors, stated in the introduction to the book that "Arabic as a language has not adapted itself to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression" (6). Additionally, as expressed by Syrine Hout in her article, "To Paint and Die in Arabic: Codeswitching in



Rabih Alameddine's *Koolhaas: The Art Of War*, "Arabic plays a vital role in queering time and thus securing a (more) private and occasionally exclusive space in which multiple emotions—love, anger, guilt, and nostalgia—can be better expressed" (5); however, there are instances when the characters are unable to return to their native tongue, e.g., "when Samir tries to use Arabic to introduce Mark as his "lover" (102), he realizes that he does not have the perfect Arabic equivalent for this concept" (18). These moments in the text encapsulate the importance of language, its dual role as safe haven and as obstacle, and the power it holds over the characters.

### **3. *Gender:***

Thirdly, I dive into gender. Gender and its performative nature were popularized by Judith Butler. She argues that gender performativity is the repetition of stylized actions, which accumulate to create an imposing set of ideologies and norms, based on social constructs inflicted on the individual, that defines their behavior (19). She chooses to focus on the deconstruction of gender, performativity, and gendered societal norms. Although she queers performativity, in that she challenges preconceived notions of heteronormative behavior, a certain stereotype of homosexuality that should fit into society and follow expectations arose (McClive, 44). The stereotype which was meant to fit into heteronormative society was based on an over-masculinization of the male queer individual in order to imitate the heterosexual male and over-feminization of the female queer individual, both done in an attempt to abide by the standards of heteronormative society. In other words, queer individuals had to perform heterosexuality in order to exist peacefully within heteronormative society.

With the rise of queer theory and the discourse surrounding it, the need arose to dissociate queerness from heteronormativity. In parallel, queer activism, calling for freedom of gender expression and the right to identity began its ascension within the community. In addition, the United States went through the AIDS epidemic during the late 70's and 80's, which helped initiate these mobilizations. This dive into the history of queerness and queer theory, is important to create the framework through which the following points are made solid: Western activism and civil society adopted queer discourse, particularly retaining the essence of dissociating from the mainstream, almost naturally, but unfortunately largely superficially and metaphorically. That is to say, queer discourse was reshaped and integrated, somewhat badly I would argue, into a societal issue with civil activism at its basis. This, however, permitted the development of multiple movements, primarily, the gay rights movement, an example of which is Stonewall. The Western course of queer discourse very starkly contrasts with that of Middle Eastern queer discourse, and more importantly, with Middle Eastern queer realities and narratives. As a consequence of the superficial absorption of queer discourse in Western society, the need to counter heteronormative mainstream norms became a necessity; queer culture was then forced into a structure of identity proclamation and politics that became fundamental to promoting a deviant, non-heteronormative, or ultimately, queer community.

I aim to delve into how Western queer ideologies such as the focus on coming-out became an expectation for the validation of queer identity, but then was adapted as a liberation tool for queer communities of the developing world. This generalization, or rather globalization, of the Western queer experience completely ignores the myriad of different backgrounds queer individuals come from. This becomes especially relevant in

the case of the Middle East, where class, education, religion, and geography play a role in the formation of queer identity. Matter of fact, queer individuals from ‘upper’ class upbringing, with access to higher education, and highly influenced by Western globalization, have the capacity to indulge in this ‘foreign’ culture, thus allowing them to perform this Western rite of passage. They, however, are a minority within the queer Arab/Lebanese community, and are overshadowed by those who do not identify with queer or follow queer politics (Massad, 373; Amer, 386). This is evident in the texts, where the characters who are out are often from a specific socio-economic background within the Lebanese hierarchy. It is with this in mind that I bring forward within my argument this form of social violence propagated in the queer community, i.e., the privilege of coming out and living as a queer person in heteronormative spaces.

#### **4. *Activism:***

Queer activism very quickly became a globalized movement which relied on queer theory to help its move into a mainstream that fought for gay rights, such as marriage equality, while pushing for new norms that accepted non-heteronormative identities and individuals who asserted their non-heterosexual self (Amar and El Shakry, 331).

However, this has led to a queer discourse based on this newly founded queer performance that relies on globalized queer activism to establish a small yet vocal sub-community that contests the heterosexual cis-gendered mainstream. Despite the lack of narratives by and for people of color, the queer movement has nevertheless advocated for a more ‘liberal’ acceptance of queerness and queer people in countries outside the “West.” In light of that ‘liberal’ movement, the West sought to create a space for the acceptance and validation of queerness and queer identities in communities across the

Middle East. By engaging with these communities and establishing gay rights movements, expressing solidarity, and launching multiple organizations, such as Helem, Western queer movements were able to push their transnational queer discourse onto the Middle East (Amar and El Shakry, 334). Through the act of coming out, Middle Eastern queer people are encouraged to become part of the Western queer community, creating an 'us' vs. 'them', thus gay becomes a positive assertion of solidarity with an 'us' (McClive, 42-43). This sense of community imposes itself on the members yet pushes each individual to affirm and proclaim their identity no matter the consequences. The act of coming out is seen as necessary, the aftermath met with support from the queer community, whether through the individual's entourage, or through online presence (Rasmussen, 145). The individual comes before the context. To be queer is to ascertain a queer identity, to proclaim it publicly, and take up space in the Western queer sphere (Ritchie, 560). The same cannot be true for queerness in Arab society. To be queer is to fit in and in order to avoid isolation, violence, and harm. Despite the presence and support of a queer community, it remains a fact that Arab culture(s) are heavily intertwined with religion, pushing forth the perception of amorality on any non-heteronormative existence.

Unfortunately, queer in the Middle East is different. Incorporating it with a Western 'us' and separating it from its social context does not liberate or strengthen the cause. Western queer discourse and identities override the narratives of the individuals due to an imposed missionary role of liberation (Massad, 361; Ritchie, 567). That is not to say that the drive to identify oneself is outside the realm of normality for queer Arabs nor that it is an imposition of Western values but rather that the influence of Western queer discourse pushes this self-identification process from the private sphere to the public

sphere in order to assert a ‘true’ queer identity (567). Furthermore, accounts in academia of social behavior of queer Arabs have been largely written by an overwhelming majority of white queer Western scholars who have diminished the Arab experience to fit their model of liberation (Massad, 362). However, we cannot ignore the influence Western discourse has had on the social infrastructure and dynamics of cities, i.e., giving rise to multiple different gay subcultures and spaces (such as bars, the most notable example being Stonewall) and encouraging queer political activism; yet international organizations measure progress in terms of tolerance towards queerness (Dunne, 11; Moussawi, 859). Thus, the experiences of the Arab queerness are reduced to nothing more than a bare minimum of acceptance, devaluing them and decontextualizing them, taking away from the unique interactions and influences of culture and background. As mentioned above, Western values have infiltrated the social dynamics in Beirut for example, where sexual difference is tolerated until it breaches the social norms and conventions of the pre-existing patriarchal system (Moussawi, 864).

### **C. Arab and Queer**

Arab communities are known for their strong familial ties and the intricate networks existing between neighbors, friends, and surroundings. Arab children do not normally leave their parents’ house at the age of 18 or before marriage; if they do, the parents remain tightly involved in their children’s lives, where they impose personal and social expectations, which are largely shaped by pressure from their entourage (Merabet, 69-90). Therefore, for a queer Arab individual, sexual behavior is not impossible so long as it remains private/secret and “paramount values of family maintenance and reproduction and supporting social networks are not threatened” (Dunne, 9) Additionally, the local

media propagate the necessity of familial values and normative sexual behavior over sexual nonconformity and personal romance (Dunne, 9-10).

Communities such as these, with values that are so heavily anchored in familial ties, do not agree with Western individualism. When the queer sexual discourse of the West predominates details of global everyday life and dismisses the unique life of, in this case, queer Arab individuals, it exports neoliberal and neo-imperial behaviors that indiscriminately absorb and universalize all distinctive queer identities in the non-Western sphere (Amar and El Shakry, 332; Massad, 361). Since “Western ... queer activists do not generally understand that their kind of visibility ‘does not work for everyone’”, reconsideration of gay rights politics and the narrative of the closet are crucial to restructure queer discourse in light of narratives which lie outside of that realm (Ritchie, 568-69).

Words are not innocent, because they shape reality around us by giving meaning to behaviors and social context (Amer, 385). However, Arabic remains lacking in the sexuality and gender terminology that were coined in the West decades ago. In fact, most identity words used by queer Arabs are English, for a lack of appropriate or fitting words in Arabic which people are comfortable using (382). With queer rights being heavily influenced by the Western discourse, associated vocabulary becomes globalized along with the movement and thus perpetuates a neo-colonial approach to queer performativity (Leap, 2) This imposition of Western queer semantics also renews a sense of orientalism specific to the misrepresentation of queer Arab identity, such that there is a history of many Western academics making language-based mistakes when addressing queer texts in Arabic (Massad, 370).

The queer movement in the Arab world is going through a rushed evolution to reach Western standards of queer discourse without taking the necessary time to install the infrastructure needed to support the movement. The integration of the already established Western ideology and more importantly, vocabulary, into the vernacular of Arab queers transforms the 'gay' identity. This gay identity usually entails the sense of identity of an individual, most commonly cis male, who engages in non-heteronormative sexual relations, and is often comfortable with their truth. By accepting who they are, these individuals accordingly assert their existence within society (Massad, 373). The lack of understanding of homosexuality forces Arab families and Arab communities to assume 'gay' is a feminine and weak performance; a failure in the nurture of the son (Massad, 365). In fact, even within the queer Arab community, there are definite expectations of gay and what it means. Emanating from internalized homophobia, misogyny, deeply rooted patriarchy, and toxic masculinity (which often ascribes to the hegemonic masculinity of the time as discussed in Patriarchal Dividend below), the behavior of queer Arabs, especially male, is similar to the homophobia in the West. Indulging in male-to-male sexual activity does not necessarily impose the homosexual or gay identifier (Dunne, 10). As Merabet (2014) reports, many men that indulge in the queer activities in the Lebanese capital do not subscribe to the label of gay (246-248). Coming out conveys a derogatory image more often than not associated with femininity and weakness; chiefly because gay as an adjective is used to describe queer men that deviate from the heteronormative performance of Arab society (135-155). Men in the Arab queer sphere choose to avoid interactions with feminine men over ones that perform according to Arab societal norms, usually described as 'discreet' (43-68).

Fortunately, there has been progress in the last few years. Globalization, through the access to mass media and pop culture, has expedited the development of a queer supportive infrastructure, where individuals across generations are becoming more cognizant of queer identities. However, stigma associated with a queer stereotype disrupts families and is often perceived as a failure in parenting or a lack of communal and familial support (Merabet 2014). Moreover, the commercialization of queer identities and semantics, combined with the import of Western queer ideology, vocabulary, and representation on mainstream media in the Arab world, transformed queerness among the members of the queer community and among family members into a portrayal of weakness, femininity, and ‘unnatural’ sexual behaviors.

#### **D. Queer Identity, Visibility, and the Failure of the Western Queer Discourse**

The way that the Western queer discourse and ideals operate imposes a segregation of a person’s identity in order to achieve emancipation from prejudicial social standards. While homophobia and misogyny, whether external or internal, are not absent in the West, there is still a large space left for the evolution of a person’s identity and ultimately visibility within their societies and communities, often leading to access to a supportive base. Comparatively, a demarcation of identity in the Arab world does not. In fact, there is a lack of a unified queer community. Moreover, a queer Arab declaring their identity in opposition to the social norms of their prejudiced community would lead to exile from the general community. Subsequently, the queer Arab community is loosely based on Western queer standards but is not supported by the same infrastructure, leading to a shallow impersonation of a more complicated system placed onto fragmentary foundations.



Intersectionality is necessary within any context of queerness and gender performativity. With that in mind, it becomes significantly more pressing to discuss ‘white gay’s burden’: the spread of Western queer ideologies and gay rights movements through mass media, globalization, and political agendas, which have shaped the way queer people around the world are perceived. In the case of the queer Arab body, it promoted an individualization of the queer Arab body in an attempt to spread a certain worldwide acceptance of homosexuality despite local contexts. Within the Western sphere of queer discourse, the development of a queer identity is done through an imposition of sexuality as a primary element, with acceptance of the family or society as secondary. Thus, one’s existence in the western queer community is defined by their identity and their assertion of their visibility. By holding onto this argument, the West perpetuates a sexual binary which does not liberate the Arab queer nor make their visibility an empowerment tool (Massad, 383).

Queer Arab bodies are often forced into a portrayal that is heteronormative or compliant with gender roles and performances in order to avoid shame and public humiliation. The issue is not whether Arab society permits these individuals to exhibit their own sexuality but rather the fact that Western queer performance is the main reference for the establishment of queer identities on a global scale, which by nature goes against the essentials of queer discourse and theory that state the need to present oneself free of societal, and in this case communal, influences.

Western representation of queer Arabs has always erased their individualities and the distinctions that structure their existence within their society and within the international sphere, almost purposefully avoiding any discussion of class, race, and sect (Moussawi, 871). By implementing Western queer ideology, their version of queer

performativity is imposed on the queer Arab person. Furthermore, the usage of Western vocabulary and experiences undermines a uniquely Arab experience and identity, isolating queer Arabs from their own “sociohistorical and literary traditions” (Amer, 387). Undeniably, a community is unique in and of itself but is ultimately affected by the different aspects of society, which tend to dictate its dynamics and its growth. However, with the magnitude of globalization and the commercialization of the Western queer experience, the narratives of queer people of color have been sidelined in order to create and implement a certain queer guidebook which imposes rules and laws that one may follow to reach liberation. Adhering to the guidebook thus shapes a queer identity that is validated by the new global society, but this can be dangerous because it ignores the local environment that tends to have a more immediate and more often, severe, consequences on the individual.

There have been many movements, especially in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, to reclaim queer Arab identity, and redefine it in the international queer sphere (Ritchie, 570; Merabet, 227-245). “Queer resistance and sexual counter-politics are imaginable in the Middle East” (Amar and El Shakry, 332). These movements are a clear attempt at a refusal of Western queer influences that have streamlined the queer Arab experience through liberal vocabulary and a globalized Western performative. The failures of Western queer discourse stem from the lack of application of queer theory, which comes down to dismantling the binaries of gender and sexuality, and recognizing identity as a fluid public interface where differences, cultures, and voices are heard and viewed on an equal level (Dunne, 11).

Society is inherently stratified. The layers change depending on the axis followed by the lens but at the end of the day, it remains a layered conglomerate of

human experience. One of the axes I am interested in in my exploration of society in the Middle East is that of gender and sexuality, not only as it applies to the queer communities but also the heteronormative one. A theory of interest when delving into this subject is Connell “Patriarchal Dividend.” In her book, *Masculinities* (1995), Connell explains what it means to be a man living under patriarchy and explores the different types of masculinities born of the system, from those that fit into the stereotype to those that are ‘queer’, and how they work to reify the system and assure its continuity, whether actively or passively. She also introduces the concept which I find not only relevant to the heteronormative society and queer communities in which we reside but also to the fictional (yet supposedly representative) worlds created by the authors I will be discussing later in the thesis. This concept, the patriarchal dividend, basically states that “patriarchy privileges most men, regardless of their particular location within, or support for, the hegemonic system of male domination” (Whitehead, 467).

After a closer look into Connell’s concept, one finds that the patriarchal dividend is more nuanced and does not mean a blanket privilege for all male-bodied individuals. In fact, it is complicated with the introduction of hegemonic masculinity, i.e., the ‘stereotypical’ masculinity of the time, as well as race, religion, sexuality, and gender expression, transforming the lens into a multidimensional and intersectional apparatus. Therefore, within the grouping of masculinity versus femininity under the patriarchy, there resides a hierarchy of masculinities which dictate the privilege afforded to the people who fit in the respective strata. Furthermore, these masculinities are further divided and cross-compared according to their intersections with other identity markers (race, sexuality...).

It is best to imagine the patriarchal dividend as a race, with those who abide by hegemonic masculinity given a head start whereas those who are further from that 'ideal' are at the back. This is of course restricted to those who even enjoy the privileges of the patriarchy, women and female-bodied individuals not being part of the race. That is where the power of the patriarchal dividend lies, in the further separation between masculinity and femininity and the stratification of masculinity/masculinities and the integration of other identity markers. Another example which helps clarify the concept is that of policing in the West, a heteronormative white man is more privileged than a heteronormative black man or a man of color in that they are not perceived as immediately guilty or having committed a crime. This is very obviously not restricted to masculinity but extends to race, but this is where the patriarchal dividend finds its home, in the crevices of intersections. Another example: a cis-gendered gay white man and a cis-gendered heterosexual white man. Now it is an issue of sexuality rather than race (which is an issue within itself and is more complicated than indicated above). Unfortunately, applying this to Arab society just showcases once again how global and deep-rooted the patriarchy is. However, within our society, masculinity is tied to the female body with the implications of honor and property (that is to say, property over a woman's body).

In sum, what I aim to study in the coming pages is the ways through which violence, physical, psychological, and social, play a role in Koolaid's and Bareed Mista3jil. Also, I hope to zero in on western influence within these texts, with a particular interest in language. Finally, I argue that in Koolaid's, the freedoms allocated to the author allow for a more selective, and therefore narrower, approach to representation and the retelling of queer narratives which, in the case of Koolaid's, tends

to highlight violence and ignore the characters and their unique stories, causing them to appear shallow and flat, almost with no personality or existence outside of violence. In opposition, what we see in Bareed Mista3jil is the use of violence only when needed and as a supporting element rather than the main element, by recounting real stories and showcasing real and fully-formed multidimensional characters.

## CHAPTER II

### KOOLAIDS: PANDERING TO THE WEST

*The rider on the white horse says,  
“Fuck this good and faithful  
servant. He is a  
non-Christian homosexual, for  
God’s sake. You brought me all the  
way out here for a fucking fag, a  
heathen. I didn’t die for this  
dingbat’s sins.” (1)*

What is fiction if not a rewritten reality? Rabih Alameddine in his debut novel, *Koolaid: The Art of War* successfully balances the very delicate tightrope between what is real and what is not. However, given the subject, or in this case, subjects, of his book, one would assume Alameddine’s approach to retelling the narratives of his characters and the community they are based on would be more grounded in reality in order to best represent the people of those narratives. I am speaking here of the gay men and straight women who are the primary storytellers of *Koolaid*. They are meant to represent a generation of Lebanese emigrants that fled from a war to find a better life elsewhere. For the most part, that is exactly what we see, along with recollections of their pasts in Lebanon, as well as a sprinkle of stories about other people living through the atrocities of war. My issue is not with the way the characters navigate their reality but rather with how they are written and what their reality truly represents. I believe that in attempting to marry the “(Middle) East” with the “West”, Alameddine loses a depth

which only he and other queer Arabs have access to. Throughout the reading of *Koolaid*s, I couldn't help but wonder why the characters all felt flat, lost amongst a cacophony of disjointed fragments of memories and present moments. The reason I found was that by writing the book with a look to the West and an attempt to decipher the Middle East, Alameddine creates unidimensional characters that are not representative of a true queer Lebanese experience but rather an orientalist view of their lives. It is because of this that more often than not we as readers are left wondering who said what and whose story we are reading. In a testament to the previous sentence, my advisor and I have disagreed about who the main character is in one of the most important events in the novel. Surely because the characters are similar and their narratives repetitive. This is only stressed by the lack of chapters in the novel. By breaking it into 244 vignettes of varying lengths with no logical order to them, the authors of the vignettes are shuffled and lost in the stories, rarely identifiable. To further add to the chaos of the mixed vignettes, some are as short as a single sentence or the length of entire chapters, but often are unrelated or incomprehensible (without context). I would even say that some are non-sensical and added for ornamentation, such as "Even as a child, I preferred goat's milk" (172), which has no purpose in the novel except as a callback to an earlier vignette where goat milk was mentioned. This sense of disorientation may be a literary tool along the lines of postmodernism or stream of consciousness writing, although this seems more deliberate by Alameddine but he fails to account for the fact that by applying it, he effectively erases any sense of individuality about the narratives. This in turn creates a problematic orientalist view that reiterates the idea that all queer Arab narratives are the same. As Dina Georgis illustrates:

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said pointed out that the West's imperialist relationship to the Middle East has a sexual character. Positioning itself as masculine, the West used its reason to colonize and penetrate the feminized and oversexed Arab world. Shaming is arguably endemic to the logic of Orientalism, whose legacies live on in new social formations, the latest rendition being the rise of gay imperialism. Increasingly, liberating gay people in the Middle East has become a central discourse of neocolonialism. The implications are damaging to Arab queers, not only at a personal level, when the imposition of coming out pressures young people to live openly with LGBTQ identities, but also at a sociopolitical level (235).

Applying that to Koolaidis and Alameddine, we begin to see the pandering done to the West in the author's focus on the liberation of gay Arabs from a war-torn country where death is inevitable to a modern metropolitan nation. As readers we are reminded time and again about the horrors of war, using flashbacks and retellings of stories, or more specific examples of violence, like the scorning of a talent which is later celebrated in the liberated world. The combination of the authorless (more or less) and orientalist approach is visible throughout the novel, with a few exceptions when the "main" character of the particular narrative is mentioned as the speaker/narrator, and feeds into the pandering. The reader creates the voice of the narratives, they are not unique or individualistic, just gray vignettes.

### **A. Violence and Queerness**

Intertwined amongst this orientalist perception of these queer narratives is the unbridled depiction of violence. It is important that I take a minute to better define violence as I aim to use it below and how it is experienced in the novel. I use violence interchangeably with injustice or struggle because of its wide application to situations which encompass the social, physical, and psychological spheres. In order to better understand the violence, I dive below into the three spheres in an attempt to better



elucidate the differences amongst them, the interplay they may have, and how they affect the narratives, characters, representation, and ultimately the novel.

### ***1. Physical Violence:***

I first wish to focus on the physical sphere of violence because that is the one most commonly known to us. Physical pain, discomfort, struggle, all these are at the base of a well-rounded human experience; if anything, the lack of pain or pain receptors is considered an illness. Within *Koolhaids*, physical violence takes on multiple forms with the most overwhelming being death of the body. However, a closer reading reveals an implicit, and sometimes explicit, sexual tone in almost all acts of physical violence portrayed. From the acts of shooting of innocent people, to the scenes of rape and sexual assault, all carry the weight of sex within them. The reason for all of this is because all acts of physical violence in the novel happen in Lebanon; the sole exception being the AIDS epidemic which affects many of the characters in the US. As Steven Salaita (2011) argues in his book, *Modern Arab American Fiction*:

Alameddine explores two primary moral and political themes: the AIDS epidemic and the Lebanese Civil War, from which the pun in the subtitle is drawn. He juxtaposes the two phenomena, showing both of them to be without ready logic and presenting one of the novel's central ironies: because of AIDS, sex, which humans participate in as a life-bearing act, has become a harbinger of death. In the inverse, war inevitably produces death, but it is always justified as a necessary affirmation of life (44).

If we pause and reevaluate the previous sentence, we can find yet another thread tying Alameddine's novel into the web of orientalist misconception of the queer Lebanese narrative. By associating all physical violence with Lebanon, what we get is an abridged understanding of the experiences lived by the characters which has been confined to violence in a set space, Lebanon.

“The three Lebanese characters, in specific, Mohammad, Samir, and Makram first discover and experience their homosexuality in Lebanon during the war. This discovery/experience signifies the first hint of the parallel formed between war and sexuality in *Koolaid*” (Aridi, 116). What Aridi aptly points out is the undeniable connection Alameddine creates between sexuality and the extreme act of physical violence that is war. Additionally, the fact that their experiences with their sexuality, which is considered a major part of who they are as characters and people, is so tied into physical violence via the Lebanese civil war reaffirms the outsider’s view and the flat depiction of Lebanese queer men. With that in mind, if we were to explore individual experiences of the Lebanese characters and their sex stories in the novel, we find that once again they share very similar stories, almost creating an amalgamation of a single Lebanese experience of sex, only with war as the background. Samir’s first experience is with Georges:

He takes me down into the garage. He leads me to a dark, secluded corner. It is dark, damp, and putrid. He asks me if I want to see his cock. I say sure. Only if I drop my pants, he says. My pants come flying off. He shows me his cock. It is beautiful. You can touch it, he says. I do. You’re a natural, he says. I am aglow. Tum around and bend over, he says. I do as I am told. I feel his hands massaging my ass. I feel a wet finger penetrate me. It feels uncomfortable. I like it. You’re a natural, he keeps saying. I am proud. I feel him press something bigger against my ass. I know what it is. I am not stupid. I try to help him, but it gets too painful. He is all the way in. It hurts a lot, but I like it. You’re a natural, he keeps saying. He keeps pumping until he gets rigid and shouts all of a sudden. At the same instant, the sound of gunfire erupts again, so I can’t distinguish what he is shouting (27).

The fact that one of the first sexual experiences we read is so graphic conjures the image of a life in a conflict zone where sex is devoid of meaning or purpose, practiced only as a basic animalistic need. Mohammad is obviously in physical pain Georges is penetrating him but he is also experiencing pleasure and excitement, an

interesting contrast between the interdependent relationships sex has in the novel, teetering between pain and pleasure, whether it be war or the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, as Georges orgasms, he is muffled by the sound of gunfire, reminding the reader of the war going in the background, almost like a call back to the reality experienced by the characters, that is sex, sexuality, and violence are interwoven. After the sex scene in the garage, we follow as he runs upstairs to watch the war from the roof, almost immediately, a bullet flies at his genitals. This can be read in reference to how the sex he had experienced earlier was violent, unsafe, dangerous. “When sexual violence is used as a weapon, it is designed to ‘intimidate, degrade, ‘humiliate, and torture the enemy’. The rationale behind and effectiveness of this tactic stem from gender norms and the power relationships inextricably tied to them” (Crawford, 510). In other words, the fact that first sexual experience, which is the first instance of sex introduced to us the reader as well as the fact that it is a queer experience, is an example of sexual violence speaks volumes to the way Alameddine inadvertently frames queer sex as intimidating, degrading, and heavily based on the reaffirmation of gender norms.

Further in the novel, we are introduced to a heterosexual couple, Nick and Samia. Before jumping into the sex scenes, which are not only violent in action but rich in metaphors and objects of violence, I wish to focus on an earlier interaction they have in which they discuss Samia’s husband’s homosexual pursuits:

“Why did you marry that fat faggot? I really would like to know.”  
“He is not a homosexual,” she insisted. He finally roared with laughter.  
“That’s right,” he joked. “They bring him the boys every night, and he plays Chinese checkers with them.” His brown eyes twinkled continuously with eager affability.  
“There are no boys. I don’t know what you are talking about.”  
He moved closer. “Your driver, Jihad, brings him a boy every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night at six P.M. like clockwork.” He was looking intently at her.” Did you know about that?”

“No,” she replied. She was still controlling herself. “It’s not true. Where would Jihad. bring the boys to? He can’t take them to the office.”

“He has an apartment at Ramlet Baida. Much better than the one you live in. I can show you photographs if you want.”

“You have photographs of my husband having sex with boys?” He roared with laughter again.

“I wish. Those would be fun to look at. No, I have pictures of the boys getting into the apartment building. They are all under seventeen, in case you’re interested” (85).

I choose to highlight this conversation in one of the earliest interactions between the two because of the content, or the subject, which in this case is Samia’s husband. This is important to look at as I bring up physical violence and sexuality because, in this moment, we are introduced to Samia’s husband, the war criminal, who is abusing his power to force underage boys into sexual relations with him. This is yet another instance where we, as readers, are required to observe moments of intertwined violence and queer sexuality within a Lebanese context but without the direct story, rather a retelling by someone we can safely assume is Samia’s husband’s opposition. I also wish to highlight a form of violence I will be discussing later, the psychological aspect. Throughout this conversation, both Nick and Samia are not only dismissive of her husband’s sexuality, but they also ridicule it and demonize it, making it into another deviation from the norm. This is ironic given that during a war there is no norm, or so one would assume.

“Established gender norms endow sexual violence with destructive power” (Crawford, 511). It is with that in mind that I explore the next scene, which is again between Samia and Nick. In the same vein as my discussion of physical violence earlier in the text, the reason I bring this moment into the limelight is because it is a collection of physical violence, metaphorical violence, and objects of violence, all rolled up into one moment. It also allows me to expand on a significant point this thesis is attempting

to make, that is that by endowing the only heterosexual couple in the novel with the most provocative, sexually charged, violent, and descriptive sex scene, Alameddine once again creates a rift between the narratives of queer Arabs while simultaneously queering the situation. What I mean by this is that throughout this scene, we are fed these moments as sensual and sexual, loving almost, although riddled with violence. This is in stark contrast to the way any instance of queer sex is depicted in the novel, where the violence is center stage and there are no undertones of love or care; example being first time or Ben being a sexual worker, both moments where we see queer sex as devoid of any love or commitment, a recurring theme throughout. However, this is not how Samia and Nick are portrayed, despite the violence:

He picks up a gun and shows it to her.

“I think this would suit you.”

“Okay.”

He uses the barrel of the gun to massage her vaginal lips.

“It’s loaded,” she says.

“I know.” He smiles.

The barrel penetrates. He moves it in very gently. The metal is cold. He explores with the gun. She can’t say a word. She moans. He smiles. He looks into her eyes. She is his.

“Fuck me,” she says.

He takes the gun out. He violently enters her. She thrusts up to meet him. The primitive cadence begins again.

She takes the gun from his hand. She points it at his face, her finger clutching the trigger. He smiles. He forces himself deeper. She moves the gun closer to his face. He licks the barrel. He tastes her. He puts the whole barrel in his mouth.

He performs fellatio on the gun. She smiles. She looks into his eyes. He is hers. She orgasms (151).

Reading through that we are given hints of love and care between the two characters, echoed by the lines “She is his” and “He is hers.” This scene however is treading the line between what is considered sexually deviant intercourse, along the lines of sadism and masochism, and rape or sexual assault. The reason I mention sexual assault is because the entire situation is happening with the presence of an object, we as

readers know is at the center of violence but is also repeatedly brought to the forefront throughout the novel: the gun. The pretense of having sexual intercourse with the use of a loaded gun forces the narrative between this heterosexual couple into the realm of queerness because of the inherent characteristics of the sex, i.e., deviant and dangerous. Again, we as readers have until this point been told again and again, implicitly or explicitly, that deviant and dangerous sex is queer. We are therefore placed in this liminal space between the queering of heterosexuality via violence and the presence of emotions in a strictly heterosexual setting, once again set in stark contrast to any of the homosexual settings in the novel. One point of contention with this remark is that there are moments where we see affection as a center piece in homosexual interactions such as James and Mohammad's relationship. However, it is Mohammad who argues against this in the novel when he describes any non-sexual queer relationships as more of those between siblings: "We became what in the "business" is called sisters." (64) Another central relationship to Mohammad is the one with Scott. But while this eventually becomes a friendly relationship it starts out sexual. In the upcoming pages, an exposition of this relationship in light of Mohammad's father, violence, and sexuality will be brought forth.

This is yet another layer through which violence is filtered and we are able to see that its presence is restricted to sexual acts and sexuality, rather than the overarching theme we believe it is. This isn't to say that the war and the AIDS epidemic affected only queer people, but rather that instead of becoming a secondary fact in Koolaid's and a supporting background to the characters, the war and the AIDS epidemic are primary characters themselves. The fact that they are primary characters makes it so the narrators in the novel and those supposed to be the "main" characters are portrayed as

secondary, losing any credibility and allowing for a loss of dimensionality in their portrayals. Additionally, we are given a myriad different story lines to sift through; however, there are two that are recurring and are stand-ins for AIDS and the war, i.e., the four horsemen of the apocalypse and the party with Arjuna and Krsna, respectively. These story lines may not explicitly recreate the two major ongoing events but stand in for them as a sort of metonym. It is also interesting to explore the title of the novel itself: *Koolaid: The Art of War*.

Throughout the novel we are repeatedly spoon-fed the many ways in which the author sees the civil war in Lebanon and the AIDS epidemic in the States as two sides of the same coin. That is not to say that their relationship is in any way causal or correlative, but rather that both are more often than not used as a metaphor for the other and are almost interchangeable. They are metaphors and not metonyms because as stated earlier they are not related in any way except through the pages of this book. Each is best considered a metaphor of the other, whether the virus is war like or the war virus like. What I mean to say is that I believe that in *Koolaid*, war, and in this very specific case, civil war, can be read as a virulent growth ravaging the anatomy of a country and tearing it apart from the inside out, much like AIDS. This is what Salaita (2011) argues Alameddine does with his direct juxtaposition of AIDS and the Lebanese Civil War. Whereas AIDS and its descriptions in the novel, and sickness in general, are treated like a war on the body, whether it be as an effect of the virus itself or the treatment of its symptoms. Susan Sontag, in *Illness and its Metaphors/AIDS and its Metaphors*, explores this extremely overlooked phenomenon of using the metaphor of war to stand in for illness, from tuberculosis to AIDS. One can additionally argue, as I do, that these metaphors extend beyond illness and become part of daily colloquialisms.

A simple example of how the metaphor of war-making has found its way into our daily conversation is the statement one uses when discussing the flu: "I'm fighting off a cold." Sontag speaks more to this point as it relates to the AIDS epidemic:

Not all metaphors applied to illnesses and their treatment are equally unsavory and distorting. The one I am most eager to see retired—more than ever since the emergence of AIDS—is the military metaphor. Its converse, the medical model of the public weal, is probably more dangerous and far-reaching in its consequences, since it not only provides a persuasive justification for authoritarian rule but implicitly suggests the necessity of state-sponsored repression and violence (the equivalent of surgical removal or chemical control of the offending or "unhealthy" parts of the body politic). But the effect of the military imagery on thinking about sickness and health is far from inconsequential. It overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill. No, it is not desirable for medicine, any more than for war, to be "total." Neither is the crisis created by AIDS a "total" anything. We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We—medicine, society—are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever... About that metaphor, the military one, I would say, if I may paraphrase Lucretius: Give it back to the war-makers. (94-5)

Having briefly explored physical violence, I move on to psychological violence. *Koolhaas* is fraught with examples and instances of psychological violence, but what does that even mean? In order to better understand it, I use literary trauma theory to expand upon the meaning and extract a deeper understanding of this form of violence. Socio-political theory in the form of the spiral of silence theory is also applied. Both shall be used to peel away the layers of violence enacted on the characters, whether by others or themselves.

The importance of delving into psychological violence derives from the basic fact that these characters are constantly bombarded with difficulty, from sexual assault and war to AIDS and death of loved ones, yet when we as readers approach these characters and attempt to better understand their emotional depth, we find that more often than not, there isn't any. The characters are emotionally flat and uninteresting without the



presence of some sort of violence happening to or around them. The perfect example of this is Mohammad. After many readings of *Koolhaas* there are less than a handful of things that can be said about who the character and/or his personality are exactly. We are provided with memories and delusions, time and again, or paintings described to us, all in an attempt to sublimate the violence he lived through or is living through. This is once again the problem we see in *Koolhaas*, the “main” characters becoming secondary to the violence, a conscious choice Alameddine makes.

## *2. Psychological Violence*

With regards to psychological violence, I’d first like to start with the theory of the spiral of silence. Despite the theory being a socio-political one, I use it in this thesis on two levels, the psychological and, later on, the social. I believe it is important to make the distinction between the matter in which it is used because the complexity of violence and the situations where the theory is applied call for an unpacking in order to better tune it to the event. First, what is the spiral of silence? Coined by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, the spiral of silence theory states that an individual’s personal opinions may be silenced when found to be in contrast with their community or society. This in turn creates a fear of isolation and rejection from society within an individual leading them to conform by remaining silent instead of voicing their opinion. According to Noelle-Neumann, the fear of isolation is the central force which propels the spiral of silence because, at the end of the day, people are social beings and are in need of one another. In *Koolhaas*, we are introduced to the effects of this spiral without our knowledge, through the retelling of these narratives. Throughout the characters’ journey, they are repeatedly faced with the decision between silence or freedom. I say

freedom because within the spiral, overcoming the fear of isolation is to be free of the effects of the spiral, thus granting oneself a voice regardless of its implications. Some examples in Koolhaas are Mohammad's interactions with his father and Samir's interactions with his mother, which I will explore more thoroughly below. The question, however, remains: how does someone gauge the spiral, how do you know when you've gone too far and are stepping out of the silence? The best example is Mohammad's presentation of his drawing to his father. In an attempt to share an intimate moment and showcase his passion and talent, Mohammad shows his father the drawing that was commissioned of him. However, in that moment, we, along with Mohammad, discover that by showing us and his father his point of view, his opinion so to speak, Mohammad breaks through the barrier and is very quickly introduced to the spiral.

I was seven when my father decided to do his fatherly thing. He asked me to show him my drawings. I was nervous as I showed him my work. He looked at my copies of the masters and said, "This is good, but how come you always draw the men? I think you should draw some of the women as well. Come back and show me when you have drawn some women."

I ran into my room knowing exactly what to draw. I had seen a copy of Goya's *Nude Maja*. I drew a damn good copy of the woman lying down on the sofa. I was not able to get a good face since the reproduction was so small. I decided to improvise. I did a very good drawing of my mother's face into Goya's *Nude Maja*. I ran out of the room and showed it to my father.

I never saw his hand coming. He had turned beating his children into an art form. He slapped my face only once. That was probably because I ended up on the other side of the room by force of the blow. My mother came running into the room, and he threw the drawing in her face. He left the room saying, "Your son is a pervert." [...]

I was seven then. I didn't know any better. I never showed my drawings again for a very long time. (54-5)

Drawing on the spiral of silence, we can very simply see that the underlying social influence, which operates through mass polarization, usually via socialization by institutions such as the school or the family, increased the extremity with which Mohammad's dad reacted to the drawing, thus reinforcing the spiral and forcing

Mohammad into becoming a recluse from his father and society. This moment is especially interesting because in that moment of rejection and disgust he experienced; Mohammad was subjected to a form of psychological violence. Not only was he immediately hurt by the reaction, but it also caused a deeper laceration on his character which never left, as is evident in his saying “It is true. I am a pervert. A pervert who sold a 60 by 80 called My Mother as the Nude Maja for \$300,000 in the mid-eighties at Franklin Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. Where was that son of a bitch then?” (55). Years later he is recalling the moment he was first scorned for his talent, picking at the scar his father left on him. This same moment can be read through the lens of literary trauma theory. As Richard McNally mentions, “narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (71).

This is what we see and experience here. The character’s retelling his story, years after it had happened through his own narration and his own understanding, almost in an act of defiance of the time it happened, and a reclamation of his own talent and power. This moment showcases the significance of understanding trauma in literature through the lens of trauma theory: by writing Mohammad’s experience as a retelling of a memory, Alameddine allows for the character to express a deeper level of consciousness for us readers to tap into. However, the issue remains. Despite his attempt, Alameddine fails to apply this to instances where we see Mohammad’s trauma and experiences free of his queerness. To rephrase, every instance where we as readers are allowed this glimpse into Mohammad’s psyche, it is so inextricably intertwined with

his sexuality that we are led to believe that one undoubtedly caused the other, whether it be his queerness which led to trauma, or his trauma that led to queerness. To be more specific, a closer look at this one instance where his presentation of interest in the female form on request from his father was met with violence delivers a shock to us as readers. We are only then able to interpret this scene as either his father's reaction of disgust to his deviant sexuality or as the moment his sexuality was made deviant because of his father's rejection of his point of view. Of course, I believe it is the former; however, one cannot deny that this is a possibility, especially when other scenes and instances have a similar structure. For example, Samir's experience with Georges, which is undoubtedly a sexual assault, but retold through the eyes of a traumatized narrator who was almost shot in the crotch. As Dina Georgis writes in *The Better Story*, "the stories we tell about ourselves, about others, about world events about the past, about our political beliefs, about our identities are not just simply social and political constructions but elaborations of our psychic dramas" (xi).

This is but one example of how the spiral operates. However, my interest lies in the ways the spiral is used to hide queerness and force it into the shadows. One particular character that stands out as a literal representation of someone living a queer life in the shadows is Samir's crush, Karim. We are introduced to him as an older kid who shared an interest in music with Samir, but as the story develops, we see more glimpses of the two of them, usually undressed and lying about. We even get hints about Karim's sexuality when we are told he rejected his girlfriend when she refused to sleep with him and Samir. I do wish to pause here to highlight one important aspect which I will later explore in more detail. We see here that although implied to be homosexual, Samir's

and Karim's relationship is superficially heterosexual, and is thus free of any violence, that is until the following happens:

One night still sticks in my memory. I woke up when I felt him hugging me. He had his arms around me, his chest snuggling to my back, and his erection plastered on my butt. Only our briefs stood in the way. He was sleeping soundly. I had the courage to actually put my hand between us and touch his erection. He rolled back over to his side of the bed. I took his hand and held it in mine. I loved him so much. He woke up. I pretended to be asleep. The next day, he asked me if I realized at one point during the night, I had held his hand. I told him I had not realized that. He dropped the subject. (78-9)

Silence. Once again, when homosexuality is brought to the front it is almost immediately outshined by the underhanded violence, expressed through the silence, the author has chosen to focus on. In contrast to the implied homosexuality, where all we are given as readers is a sense of care and love, the explicit mention of homosexuality is almost immediately shut down and met with violence. As Hout discusses in the article *Sex and love as routes for border crossing and homing desire in anglophone Lebanese fiction* (2016), Samir and Karim repeat a cycle of homoerotic behavior which becomes a way to establish a space they would consider home while simultaneously reenacting straightness and masculinity. She also points out the irony expressed during their visit to a New York brothel, where they spend an hour trying to "come" while all they wanted to do was "come out." The reader is confronted with the reality of the moment where the two pretend to be a version the other would not reject, holding on to the silence not out of comfort but fear.

Psychological violence thus finds its way to interact with and overtake any apparent deviant sexuality. Furthermore, we are last told about Karim when he dies in a horrific motorcycle accident. Once the details are revealed, the pattern of having violence, in this case physical but driven by the psychological (spiral of silence), underwhelm the

importance and uniqueness of queerness. Despite the following conversation between Samir and a man he was having sex with, I think it is interesting to see the different reactions portrayed by the speakers, where one shows instant affection while the other is apathetic and detached, a point which ties into the ways social violence, social upbringing, and the juxtaposition of Western queerness and Arab queerness are portrayed:

“It was sad how he died, wasn’t it?”

“Did you know him?” I asked incredulously.

“Not really. He just hung around the Spike. He never went home with anybody. Nobody I know of ever had sex with him. He just hung around and got drunk.”

“He hung around a gay bar?” My voice betrayed me.

“Oh yeah. He got drunk at the Spike the night he died. We all saw him hit the wall.”  
(79)

In relation to the psychological violence, we can clearly see that Karim was suffering under the rule of a spiral that hung over his head. It didn’t matter that he was no longer in Lebanon, for the spiral instilled in him by Lebanese society dug its roots into his psychology and forced him into hiding, literally keeping to the shadows even in the spaces he clearly attempted to be seen in.

I have briefly mentioned literary trauma theory but to what extent it is applicable in this novel is to be discussed below. I have also purposefully steered away from discussing AIDS as a form of violence within the novel because I believe the two are very easily tied in together. Susan Sontag goes to great lengths to speak about the ways through which we as a society have come to perceive illness. She talks about the ways through which language gives power to illness, whether it be through the naming of an illness or by the descriptions and metaphors associated with it. A good example for this is the name given to AIDS at the beginning of the epidemic in the United States in 1981. Before it came to be known as AIDS, it was referred to as GRID, Gay-Related

Immuno-Deficiency. Alameddine's work, intentionally or not, operates within these premises. As Therí Pickens argues "Alameddine avoids linear narrative and, as a result, disrupts the movement toward individualizing the narrative about HIV/AIDS and becoming enraptured by an individual (read: unique) story" (74). In other words, *Koolaid* not only builds on the premise of using AIDS (and war) as metaphors but does so in such a way that further alienates and stigmatizes queer people with AIDS.

The reason I bring these points up is because of Sontag who says that "The very names of such diseases are felt to have a magic power" (6). By choosing to name it GRID, the country and its society participated in a form of psycho-social violence against members of the queer community. We see that in *Koolaid*, as from the very beginning we are introduced to a bedridden Mohammad, dying of AIDS. It is curious to note that the only mention of AIDS in the novel is usually associated with gay men. It leads one to think whether the naming caused a form of self-fulfilling prophecy within the queer community at the time. However, we are not dealing with hypotheticals, as a closer look at the text highlights the way that the queer characters infected with AIDS are treated as pariahs by everyone except allies and other community members who also have AIDS. By infecting most of the Lebanese queer characters with AIDS, Alameddine ensures that once again violence of a less immediate physical form afflicts them, therefore allowing violence yet another facet through which it may represent itself. By doing so, he also equates AIDS to war or living through war. As stated by Sontag, "Military metaphors contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill" (99) and although the use and abuse of military metaphor may be inevitable in society, it restricts any appeal to ethics (99); and by

treating it as a mystery and with enough fear, the disease becomes morally, if not literally, contagious (6).

So once again, we have these characters thrust into the jaws of violence and confronted from multiple aspects such as physical, psychological, and social. According to literary trauma theory, their narratives are then the characters' attempts at reconciling their traumas with their present. This is evident across multiple characters, beyond Samir and Mohammad who have a very obvious relationship with AIDS, war, trauma, and sublimating it (Mohammad through painting, his writing, and his hallucinations; and Samir through his writing and relationships), we see it in Kurt and Ben through their art, Samir's mother with her diary entries, and Bashir with his coming out letter to Samir.... All these different characters are at one point or another reporting their traumas and sublimating them through one form or another. Additionally, when it comes to AIDS there comes an added layer of trauma and violence. As Sontag describes:

An infectious disease whose principal means of transmission is sexual, necessarily puts at greater risk those who are sexually more active—and is easy to view as a punishment for that activity. True of syphilis, this is even truer of AIDS, since not just promiscuity but a specific sexual "practice" regarded as unnatural is named as more endangering. Getting the disease through a sexual practice is thought to be more willful, therefore deserves more blame" (114).

It is as though regardless of what might happen to the characters, their diagnosis with AIDS means an immediate subjugation to isolation. We can now see the ways through which the different theories up until now apply to AIDS, whether it be the enforcing of silence, the sublimation of trauma, or the isolation experienced, as these characters are all victims of violence, which is a combination of physical, psychological, and social elements.



### *3. Social Violence:*

Of the three forms of violence, I have left social to be discussed last, not because it is unimportant but because of its diffusion into almost all aspects of our lives and because it can at times be encompassing of the other two. The first thing we must understand about social violence is the great variety of elements which fall under the umbrella. I focus on two in particular, language and community.

When considering community, a breakdown of its components yields a few results which can then be individually scrutinized and that feed into the larger division. Within a community the components which are of any meaning are the shared values between the individuals, shared struggles, and the support system set up for all its members. This is one reason that we refer to the queer community, because despite the many differences and the lack of intersectionality within the community, one can pinpoint the shared values, shared struggles, and the support system. Social violence begins at that level of community and can affect all its members.

Although a shared struggle is a main component of community, the queer characters in *Koolhaids* have a very palpable rift along their ranks. This is mostly due to the way social violence, in the form of racism, homophobia, and sexism, make its way into the group, whether from within or without. Although not explicit, we are given a mixture of cases where we see first-hand violence experienced by the members of the community. This also ties into language and the way conversation about and around queerness and the diction related to the subject can be an effective tool in spreading violence and propagating negative stereotypes that harm the community and its members. Dina Georgis in *The Better Story* discusses the way a traumatic experience can drive someone to look for a community: “Under these circumstances [trauma], we are more

likely to turn to community because it promises safety in bonds that tie people together. These bonds, however, are conditional and require submission to authority” (28-9; emphasis added).

My emphasis is to shed light on something that is rarely thought about and to a large extent relates back to the spiral of silence theory. By joining a community, regardless of size, one basically subscribes to their values (even if they don't share ALL of them) and hence becomes enclosed within the spiral of silence of that community, which means that speaking out against the community or the group would lead to isolation and rejection from the in-group. We see this happen with illness, especially AIDS: “Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain “risk group,” a community of pariahs” (Sontag, 112-3). We also experience this with religious communities, which often have strict regulations to maintain their group.

However, regardless of what kind of community it is, it is always prone to causing or perpetuating social violence, in one form or another. For example, “all monotheistic traditions share elaborate constructions and rituals that sanction violence, even suicide (e.g., Jesus Christ's crucifixion as the greatest suicide)” (Georgis, 70). Now, imagine being a minority within a minority, much like gay men with AIDS, queer kids in a place of worship, or queer Arabs in the US. These are all simple to understand examples, but we are introduced to the struggles each category above experiences. I choose to focus on the final one, queer Arab in the US, but would rather expand to say transnationally, because to a large extent ??includes the religious aspect. The primary violence experienced by any queer Arab is religion. As stated by David Hare:

When an LGBT person feels that their authenticity is being delegitimized, unrecognized, or misrecognized by the communities they inhabit, this can often influence their own sense of self-identity in harmful ways. The harm inflicted can be understood as a form of oppression, a violence that imprisons a person...(135-6)

More often than not, the first instance of this authenticity being delegitimized happens within the religious context, which is to be expected given that the social fabric in most Arab countries, and most countries, is made up of culture, religion, and traditions intertwined. The norms of religion become guides to the culture of the society which adapts the religion, thus perpetuating certain ideologies, which, once again, lead to the creation of a spiral of silence.

Another form of social violence which the characters of *Koolaid* themselves bring for this language. When Samir attempts to introduce Mark as his lover, his mother tongue fails him, as he has no word to describe someone with whom he shares a romantic and sexual relation, so he opts for French. This may not seem like much of an issue, but as Hout explores in her paper, “one’s first language as a language of emotions” (7). We can therefore understand why there is a sadness in Samir when he is unable to describe his lover in his native language. The inability to access basic emotions within the language in order to address a loved one is nothing short of torture. This point is further explored below.

One of the most important relationships in the novel is that between Mohammad and his lover-turned-sister Scott. The nature of their relationship stands in as a metonym for the way violence interacts with queerness in the novel, more specifically, violence relative to geopolitical standing. As we delve into their relationship it becomes obvious how their relationship metamorphizes from a sexual nature to an amicable one. We are introduced to Scott early on in the novel, in vignette number 3. In this vignette we are yet unaware of the relationship Mohammad and Scott share. The two of them appear to be nothing more than friends, maybe roommates.

It is not until much later that we discover their history:

I met Scott in 1980. We were both twenty. I saw him across the dance floor at the Stud. I knew who I was going home with that night. Scott was my type to a tee. Pug-nosed, baby-faced, blond, with a cute butt was my kind of boy. I walked all the way across the space and cornered him. Convincing him to come back home with me was a piece of cake. All I had to do was mention I was a painter. He had a thing for artists, he said. I had a thing for cute blond things. He said he loved my accent. I said I loved his butt. Off to my studio in North Beach we went. We never consummated our desires. We arrived at my studio. I turned the light on. He walked over to the painting I had finished that day. He stood in front of it entranced. At first, I was flattered. After the first five minutes I started getting horny. I stood behind him contemplating my painting and started rubbing my crotch on his behind. The scene was turning me on. Fucking the cute butt of a boy admiring a painting of mine was my idea of heaven. Scott then started to speak and I lost my erection. He started telling me about my life, my dreams, my fears. He started telling me about my mother, about my father. He told me about the war which tore my life apart. He related what he saw in the painting. It was the first 60 by 80. We spent that night in bed talking. We never fucked, ever. He meant everything to me. That first night he started calling me Habibi, which means “my lover” in my native tongue, a cognomen which nobody ever questioned, not even his future lovers. He never used my real name, or any of the numerous Americanized nicknames I picked up along the way. I had always assumed he found it difficult to pronounce. I was wrong. His last words before he took his last breath were, “I love you, Mohammad.” An impeccable pronunciation (25).

This singular vignette lays bare the whole of the relationship between Mohammad and Scott and ratifies the crux of this thesis: violence and queerness are married into any and all relationships queer Arabs have. In the above, Mohammad and Scott start off sexual. They are attracted to each other and attempt to have sex, which leads them back to Mohammad’s apartment. Up until this point, there is nothing that may seem out of the ordinary, however, a closer look shows us a subtle but substantial facet of the novel: “He said he loved my accent.” This one sentence brings us back into the realm of orientalism and language. By mentioning this, we are almost directly instructed to forget that these are two gay men in a night club and instead focus on the

fact that they are a queer Arab and a queer American (the signifiers include the blond hair, pug-nose, and baby face). As if to further remind the reader that being Arab supersedes being queer. It is also acting as a stepping-stone into the next paragraph, where we are taken into Mohammad's apartment.

It is the second paragraph in this excerpt that truly reveals the orientalist nature of their relationship in its infancy: the horny sexual Arab versus the free-thinking art-loving Westerner. "We never consummated our desires," says Mohammad; this same language is often associated with the nuptials between two people. It is almost like Mohammad was signaling the fact that their relationship was never equivalent to that of a married couple but as we later find out, was just as profound and meaningful. This first sentence is important because it sets a tone of incompleteness, of a lack or a loss. Once again, we are reminded of the way queer relationships are often never given the chance to grow or flourish within the novel into anything more than a sisterhood unless under the pretense of violence. As the paragraph progresses, the reader is struck by the stark contrast between the two characters in the scene, Mohammad, the horny Arab, and Scott, the intellectual Westerner: "After the first five minutes I started getting horny. I stood behind him contemplating my painting and started rubbing my crotch on his behind. The scene was turning me on. Fucking the cute butt of a boy admiring a painting of mine was my idea of heaven." The language Mohammad uses also adds a layer to the orientalist perception of savage sexually frustrated Arab men. In addition to the first sentence, these few lines paint Mohammad in the light of a sexually unfulfilled (queer) Arab man who is more concerned with his "crotch" than his own art and its admirers.

In contrast, Scott is a scholar, a saint, who lost himself in the art. He is even able to tame the savage horny Arab by explaining his own art back to him, as if to say: I empathize with you despite having never remotely experienced these horrors: “He told me about the war which tore my life apart.”

The way these two are depicted in this scene really magnifies their relationship but also highlights the disparity to be found between romance and sexuality. In other words, queer relationships seem to be forced into one of two, that of a short-lived sexual nature which almost never develops and is often toxic in one form or another; or it is a platonic relationship closer to a sisterhood, as Mohammad describes it. The chances of a loving romantic relationship which includes sex is inaccessible to queer men. As if to further drive the nail into the coffin, the first three sentences of the third paragraph reiterate that reality: “We spent that night in bed talking. We never fucked, ever. He meant everything to me.” Intimacy, sex, love, yet “never consummated.”

Another important aspect introduced in this vignette is that of language. We are aware of the presence of these characters as English-speaking individuals and we are told the vignettes in English regardless of where they take place; however, this is the first instance where we are given insight into Arabic as a language of communication. Up until this point, 11 vignettes in, we are not explicitly told that any of the characters are speaking Arabic. We are able to infer this when reading because we Mohammad tells us he is switching between languages on his death bed. What Mohammad does provide as information does not however make it so the only languages spoken are English or Arabic, French is also available despite being less obvious. I assume the letter by Samir’s mother are in Arabic whereas the email communication between the Phoenicians is in French. The languages of the novel play an important role in helping

us understand the violence within it, primarily as it becomes a form of social and psychological violence experienced by the queer Arab characters.

Before delving into that however, I would like to focus on the use of language in this paragraph. As the first instance where Arabic is used successfully to communicate within the novel, it is ironic that the word “habibi” is what comes out first. As Mohammad explains, “habibi” means lover in Arabic, yet it is almost never used by queer Arab men or women, because as a term of endearment, it can apply to anyone and does not properly convey the true nature of a relationship, especially not of queer people. Habibi can be used between two straight men, someone talking about a child, or a myriad of other relationships and interactions; and so, it is ironic that in this particular case, we have Scott use it in place of Mohammad. Mohammad understands the nuance of such a word and any Arab reader would also understand it, however, to a Western audience, including Scott, it is a sweet gesture and showcases the intimacy between the two. To further illustrate, we have another event where an Arab character, Samir, is trying to refer to his boyfriend/lover:

He shook my hand. “Mohammad,” he said. No last name. “Samir Bashar,” I said. “And this is . . .” I wanted to say lover. I did not know how in Arabic. His eyes understood. “Habibi is close enough,” he said smiling. “This is my lover, Mark.” I said it in French.

Mohammad admits to the reader in this paragraph the truth about “habibi,” that it is close enough to lover but is not truly that. Samir then goes on to say it in French. We come full circle. Not only is “habibi” not adequate or sufficient enough to describe a loving relationship between two queer Arab men, but these men also have to more

often than not seek out an alternative in another language, whether it be English or French.

How does this underline the presence of violence? Well, it falls into the two categories of psychological and social violence. Psychologically, it creates a moment of dissonance within the speaker, having to scramble for a word in their mother tongue only to come up short. The language is hostile towards even the slightest attempt at queerness and if forced into it does not fully incorporate the deeper sense of the relationship. Queer Arabs are thus forced to look beyond their own language to assert their love and their relationship. Equally within the social dynamics of violence, the inability of language, the basis of communication across any culture, to support the existence of any queer interaction outside the use of derogatory words creates a void, a form of erasure, of queerness and queer people. If you cannot find a signifier for it, then what grounds it in reality? This appeals to the basic human want or need to name things. The Arabic language is one of the most expressive language, for example, it has over 300 words for lion, but cannot express queer affection. It is harmful to the queer Arab community when your own language excludes you from its lexicon except when talking negatively about the subject: shawath, lowat, mithli, souhaqiya... all come with negative connotations or are explicitly derogatory. This is another reason, the second text, Bareed Mista3jil, makes it a point to discuss the use of English instead of Arabic, despite the whole team who worked on it being more comfortable in English or the fact that all the interviews were conducted in Arabic, the issue was not that of choice but rather of inability. As the authors of Bareed explain “when we began the process of translation into Arabic, we were faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality. The words didn’t exist to express exactly what we wanted them to” (6).



Throughout *Koolaid's*, we are never sure if Mohammad is the main character, or if there even is one. The weight given to every narrator makes it difficult to assume only one character is meant to stand out from the rest. What of Nick and Samia? Samir? Samir's mother? Or maybe even Nawal and Marwa? The multiplicity of narrators is meant to confuse and intrigue, but it also has the unfortunate other side which makes it so that many characters, particularly the queer Lebanese ones, are interchangeable. Basically, we lose the sense of who these individual characters are and what their stories are. However, the one thread connecting them violence. It is the true main character of *Koolaid's*: The Art of War, as it is even foreshadowed in the title. I have discussed thus far the three forms of violence as presented in the text: physical, psychological, or social. What does this signify, however, and why is it important to read through the violence? "Violence, as Judith Butler argues in *Frames of War*, forms the subject – at least in part" (Georgis, 69), and the subject in this case is the queer Lebanese person, more specifically, the gay Lebanese man. This is a distinction to be made between the two because we rarely see any queer women appear in *Koolaid's*; with the exception of a few straight women such as Samia, women, regardless of their sexuality, do not seem to be of import to Alameddine or to violence. This speaks volumes about the way we are introduced to violence and allowed into the inner workings of the narrators and authors of the vignettes. By forcing us to read a majority of the text through the lens of gay men, Lebanese more often, we are only receiving a filtered version of the violence, an almost censored version of the violence which is meant to validate the suffering of men while silencing women, more or less. I say silencing women because throughout the text, the few women who do speak are ostracized or killed, once again, having violence take center stage. The only exceptions

are Nawal and Marwa, who are portrayed not as women but as genderless supporters. I say this because they both choose to pursue academia instead of following the traditions of the time and marry.

Within Lebanese society and some Western societies at the time (and to this day) unmarried women were considered to be on the fringes of society, having forsaken their womanhood. Regardless of the gender, it does seem that whether we like it or not, we are fed violence in its different forms at every turn, as a reminder of trauma and as a form of catharsis. Regrettably, what this ends up doing is creating narratives of queer Arab characters that pander to the West by allowing them a glimpse into the exotic lives of a Middle Easterner, and to make it spicy, they're queer. The level of detachment felt from the text and audience can best be summarized in the following two excerpts from *Koolaid's*:

While he was swimming, the sound of a huge explosion rocked the club. Cabanas shook. Some of the empty beach chairs moved. He panicked. His first reaction was to dive underwater. He realized that was silly since whatever happened had already happened. He figured it must be one of those car bombs he kept hearing about. Nobody around him budged. One woman finally sat up on her recliner. She lifted the designer sunglasses from her face, looked around her, and said, "That was close." She repositioned her glasses, lay back down. (31)

In the first excerpt, what we get is a surrealist dystopian moment which once again highlights violence, particularly social, by pointing out the obvious presence of class division in Lebanon. The fact that Samir who has just returned home after having lived and grown up in the US, is the only one who is shocked and scared at the sound of the explosion while the sunbathers barely acknowledge it, is ironic. It is drawing a parallel across concepts. One of these is if we look at Samir as the only queer person (of which we know) in that situation, and therefore the minority, being alarmed at danger,

versus the majority who can ignore it; much like the reality of heteronormative society and the way queerness operates within that system. Another would be the ironic switching of positions between the Middle East and the West. We have Samir, the “American”, being frightened by the explosion while the natives pay it no attention. I say ironic because it is usually a reversal of situations, where we see Americans, who are far removed from the situation of war, react to war as a means to spread their democracy and freedom in third world countries. The last parallel can be drawn between the classes, the fact that Samir, a middle-upper class and his fellow classmen, are enjoying the sun while the rest of Beirut is being bombed, reinforces the sectarian divisions as experienced by Lebanese people. As James Tyner eloquently states: “When, in the course of writing our textbooks, or developing our curricula, or presenting our lectures, we fail to address violence, we implicitly condone violence and thus perpetuate an [culture] of impunity” (2-3). By presenting violence so matter-of-factly and without addressing it, Alameddine is to a certain degree promoting this culture of impunity, particularly because he uses queer Arab individuals as the medium to relate this text. Nevertheless, a story is all we have to survive trauma (Georgis, 9), so what better way to deal with trauma than to retell it in a way that empowers the owner of the narrative?

“I love his abstractions more than his realistic paintings,” he said.

“I have never seen his abstract paintings,” I said.

Both Mark and Jack looked at me strangely. “These are abstract paintings, dear,” Mark said.

“Oh, really?” I was embarrassed. I really did not know much about art. “I thought if you could tell what they are, they are not abstract.”

“Can you tell what these are?” Mark asked. “They are all just paintings with irregular rectangles.”

“Oh sure, but they are sides of our houses. That’s what they look like in our villages. He painted them beautifully. I can see the stones clearly. That’s how the stones look back home. Exactly that yellow color. All the other color highlights in each painting are different because of light conditions.”

Jack excused himself, saying he should get the director to talk to us. I sounded like an expert. I thought it was clear as day. That is why I found the paintings beautiful. They were of my home village. They were of every village, Druze, Christian, or Muslim. He had captured Lebanon. They were so beautiful. Mohammad, by placing these large paintings around the gallery, had turned the place into a Lebanese village. Finally, someone was telling the tale of my home. He did not skip over it. (92)

The second excerpt is very straightforward and to a certain extent a commentary on the novel itself. The novel is pandering to a Western audience much like Mohammad's paintings are or the book he wanted to write which is the novel itself, as Salaita (2011) states, Alameddine "focuses on a cluster of themes—the Lebanese Civil War, sexuality/homosexuality, family relations, racism, myths, and stories" (42). A Lebanese reader, however, is able to properly dissect the novel and extract its true meaning: a recounting of violence and pain, which much like Mohammad's paintings, reminds us of home, living through it, and finding a piece of us in writing. I do believe this is wishful thinking on my end as an Arab reader; however, there is also something to be said about the ways that a Lebanese person reading *Koolaid's* would still feel some kind of connection, if not to the characters, then to the places and/or to the events.

While *Koolaid's* may struggle with truly presenting a queer Lebanese experience unbridled by Western perceptions, Bareed, a collection of true stories from queer women in Lebanon, does not. The fact that these two have such a stark difference is evidence of the kind of thought and purpose placed into the writing of the two texts. One is meant to appease the Western understanding of queerness within the Arab context, but fails to create the necessary depth, while the other takes the experiences of queer Arab people and retells them as Dina Georgis argues:

Deploying the familiar nomenclature of Western sexual identities and articulating goals - liberation, gay rights, and social recognition - that resonate with those fought for in Western contexts, these mostly 20-something and 30-something queer women and trans persons are not simply or naively

appropriating Western queer epistemology. Rather, they are cultivating and negotiating their sexualities under a variety of local and geopolitical pressures. Their stories help us to begin thinking about how queer Arab becoming is postcolonial: mixed, complexly hybrid, and unfinished. (234)

## CHAPTER III

### EXPRESS MAIL

*For all of you with stories that are yet to be told*

– Bareed Mista3jil

The experiences of queer Arabs are not easily recounted. It takes a lot of effort and planning to do so, mainly because of the prejudice experienced by the queer Arab community. However, it becomes significantly easier when the initiative is taken from within the community. That is what *Bareed Mista3jil* does: a recounting of the narratives of queer Arab women by queer Arab women in order to shed light on their experiences living as queer, as Arab, and as women. In light of what has been discussed so far, this chapter will begin with an exploration of the text and the circumstances of its creation, as outlined in the preface to the narratives, before diving into the anonymous characters themselves, their narratives, the presence (or absence) of violence, and the all-around depiction of queerness.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Alameddine's characters are pandering to the West by being portrayed as unidimensional subjects of violence who happen to be queer and Arab. This is not the case in *Bareed Mista3jil*, wherein, I contend, one finds a clarification of what a more genuine queer Arab experience is or might be. This is not to say that the experiences presented in *Koolaid's* are not genuine; they are as genuine as any fiction can be, but rather that they lack an integral element of what makes the queer Lebanese experience unique and important to understand and unpack. In other words, the crux of the argument in this chapter lies within once again researching what makes the queer Lebanese person and their experiences well represented within these texts.

What discrepancy is there between *Bareed* and *Koolaid*s in the characterization of their queer Lebanese? And to what extent do we have violence playing a role?

*Bareed Mista3jil* starts off with 29 pages dedicated to prefacing the narratives, and it is my belief that without the context these pages create, the collection of true stories that is *Bareed* would be unable to accurately (re)present the queer Arab experience. As we explore these pages, it is important to note that the collection was written by a group of queer Arab individuals with the hope that it represents them as much as those it speaks for. The organization of this preface adds the necessary element of complexity to a rather simple premise. The authors take us through a journey based on answers to questions they anticipated, mostly because they had been asked them or thought of them before. One of the most important questions they answer is that of language. They dedicate an entire section to discussing this. They then delve into the details of the themes of the book, of which there are 12, and contextualize it within the Lebanese queer community and society at large. Finally, they include two sections about the past and future, which are primarily a way to encompass the whole book and ground it in the reality of queerness within the Lebanese context.

### **A. Language**

I will be discussing some of the sections of the preface, but I thought it most pertinent to talk about language first, given the importance of having both texts framed in a language that is not the mother tongue of any of those involved, whether they be the characters or the authors. As Jessica King argues, “One of the reasons that heteronormativity has such a strong influence on how our culture behaves and constructs itself is that the language we use to create reality is inherently

heteronormative” (1). What does the previous quote then say about the way that reality around Arab queerness is created in English and not in Arabic? In the same vein, we see the perfect example of this in *Koolaid*s when Samir struggles to introduce his lover in Arabic. The authors address this in the introduction:

Language is an important note to make in this introduction. This book was written first in English and then translated into Arabic. The initial reason was that the authors were personally more comfortable writing in English. *But when we began the process of translation into Arabic, we were faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality.* The words didn't exist to express exactly what we wanted them to, and we were constantly struggling between the Lebanese Arabic dialect that we speak in our everyday lives and classical Arabic which is traditionally used in writing or in the media. We naturally wanted to write the Arabic version of this book in classical Arabic but found it remarkably distant from the real-life experiences of this book's stories. In an effort to make the stories come out more authentically, we opted for writing the conversations or key phrases in Lebanese Arabic dialect verbatim, within the classically written Arabic text.

In both versions, we still struggled with euphemisms and scientific words to describe sexuality terms versus crude slang that differs in different regions of Lebanon. We've tried to analyze the reasons for this other than the obvious cause being that we don't talk about sexuality much in the Arab world. *Arabic as a language has not adapted itself to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression* (6; emphasis added).

With around 315 million Arabic-language speakers worldwide, one would assume that a queer minority within that number would still be in the millions. It is therefore strange to think that a language with such a large number of speakers would (still) lack the appropriate way to discuss such a vital sector of the population. However, in the light of understanding this as a case of social and psychological violence, we can see how by refusing to change and adapt, the language and its keepers actively participate in the erasure of the minority. In other words, in addition to what the authors of *Bareed* are saying, Arabic is a gendered, anti-queer language, which suppresses



expressions of sexuality and gender by silencing the community. If one cannot talk about it or address it, then it might as well be forgotten, lost, or erased.

This does not stand in the way of the Arab queer community coming up with its own language or reclaiming the words society uses as slurs. Unfortunately, this does not mean that the issue that language poses within the queer community is resolved, but rather that it is placed on the back burner. For example, any Arab queer person will tell you that they would rather deal with the slurs and the lack of queer language than the consequences of coming out in a homophobic family or getting physically harmed. Despite that, the reality of the situation remains that there is social and psychological violence being committed by allowing the Arabic language to be so exclusive. “These limitations take away autonomy from the individual to decide how they would like to present to the world and how they think about their own identity” (King, 1-2). With that in mind it becomes even more understandable why the authors opted for English rather than Arabic, despite the fact that every party involved in the book speaks in Arabic. To curb the erasure pushed onto the queer community by the Arabic language, English, being a more gender- and sexuality-friendly language, was chosen. I believe the authors of *Bareed* had some of this in mind, and address it below:

Additionally, homosexuals use a sexuality jargon that is different from heterosexuals in that it is an underground lingo, as well as a more liberated discussion of sex. And so, many of the Arabic terms for things like "coming out" and "gay" have been transliterated into Arabic. It was hard to translate terms like "wetness" or to translate a gender-neutral English text into Arabic without using gendered terms. Sadly, and for the lack of Arabic expressions, queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identity in English or French because that's where these words exist more freely and where we find internet pages and papers written about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab becomes increasingly difficult.

The rigidly “gendered” nature of the Arabic language posed an equally difficult challenge in recounting the stories that focused on gender identity issues. Like many other languages, such as French, Arabic uses the male pronoun as default

in all writing. Even non-person inanimate words such as "table" or "chair" are gendered. (6-7)

The above does not fully explain the use of English as the text's main language, especially since despite its flexibility, English has its faults. Both Arabic and English fail to account for people who do not ascribe to a gender binary which often also leads to a form of erasure. As Jessica King explains, "the alternative to linguistically assuming a person's gender, as the English language stands right now, is to call someone an "it," a title usually reserved for the non-human, especially inanimate objects, as we will generally assign animals genders" (2). In other words, referring to queer individuals who identify as non-binary or gender-fluid is the equivalent of comparing them to animals, which are considered a lower life form. Of course, we must not forget that much of the language used in gender and sexuality discourse was born of some form of insult. Simply put, English is not used as an alternative for Arabic because it is a perfect language which is all inclusive, but rather because, in comparison, it is the lesser of two evils.

As a starting point, the above is a good enough introduction to the reasons behind the use of English in *Bareed*; however, the issue of language is far from being settled. The use of heteronormative language to discuss queer subjects and topics can also be construed as a form of violence. As King states, "in circumstances where one is unsure of a subject's gender, modern English dictates that one should write "he or she." Such language limits and excludes other identities and is a form of heteronormative violence, forcing everyone necessarily into the gender binary" (1). She is of course speaking about English, but what about Arabic, the mother tongue of most of the characters in *Koolaid*s and all the people in *Bareed*?

Abdessamad Dialmy and Allon J. Uhlmann broach this subject in their article “Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society,” which employs an anthropological approach to Arabic and its use as a language in our societies:

All traditional Arab cultural regimes concur in considering the sexual order both binary and hierarchical at one and the same time. This order revolves around two poles: one pole, which is superior, active, and dominating, is made up of men, and the other pole, which is inferior and passive, is made up of wives, children, slaves, homosexuals, and prostitutes. (2)

Simply put, the two poles of Arab society revolve around being a man versus not being a man, the latter including not only women, but anyone who does not satisfy the conditions of the category, therefore includes children, queer people, sex workers, and migrant workers, or as Dialmy and Uhlmann refer to them, slaves. Although one might hesitate to admit that slavery is still practiced in the Middle East, and worldwide, I implore the reader to consider that despite the change in names, for example sponsorship/Kafala, the operations within the system are very much modernized versions of slavery. Thus, I find it appropriate to keep the word in reference to migrant workers because they are treated not as people with rights, but as nothing more than cheap labor.

The first ‘chapter’ in *Bareed* is a great introduction to the struggles of queer people in the Lebanese community. The speaker talks about her aversion to the word ‘lesbian’ but even more than that, her disgust with herself and others, and the Arabic language that denotes any women loving women as “souhaqiyat/sou7aqiyat.” The word “souhaqiya/sou7aqiya” in Arabic can be most closely translated into ‘dyke’ in English. However, the word carries a more sinister meaning and connotation. As the character explains, the word is almost intentionally made to invoke the image of perverted, pedophilic, and nasty people. These people dress, speak, and act in a certain way,

befitting of the image of a dyke or lesbian which Lebanese people have come to understand as “*mistarjli* (man-like). Lesbians are manly women who wear men's clothes — and not the cool, trendy men's clothes, but old-fashioned middle-aged men's clothes — who speak in deep, aggressive voices and get into fist fights on the street” (*Bareed Mista3jil*, 34). Psycho-social violence committed against someone who just wants to love someone of the same sex must live with labels that paint them with the ugliest of colors. Once again, we are confronted with the realities of being queer in the Arab world. The truth behind every word is the history of hate and discrimination the queer community has had to face; however, unlike the way it is presented in *Koolaid*s, the violence in *Bareed* is not inherently tied to queerness. This means that the violence these characters are subjected to is not prompted by their queerness as is implied in *Koolaid*s but is a symptom of living as a queer person in society. In *Koolaid*s, we see sexual assault, verbal violence, and psychological trauma, not as separate from the queerness of the characters, not as a symptom, but as a cause. Mohammad is queer because he is raped in a garage, Samir discovers his queerness because of Karim, the mysterious and dangerous friend, even Samir’s great-great-uncle tells him about his uncle in a letter, stating that Samir wasn’t the first, and that his uncle died a bitter old man, or how he himself was chastised. In all these cases of queer Arab characters, violence is essential to their queerness, causal, but that is not the case in *Bareed*. I say causal to queerness because whichever queer character you look at in *Koolaid*s, you find that they are subjected to some sort of violence that becomes formative and fundamental to their queer identity. As mentioned above, you have Mohammad and Samir, but even other characters whose backgrounds we are privy to hint at violence as being the propeller that brings to light or to the foreground their queerness. If that is not

the case, then we also have violence acting as a queering agent, such as the case with Nick and Samia. All in all, in *Koolaid's*, violence is not an added setting as we see in *Bareed*, but another character that plays a major role in the lives of all the characters.

We see very clearly, just from the first story, that the character's queerness was not due to violence but rather the other way around, the violence was due to their queerness. The whole point of exploring this relationship between violence and queerness in both texts is to showcase the stark contrast in the retelling of fictional versus non-fictional queer Lebanese narratives. Whereas *Koolaid's* fails to make queerness the centerpiece of a queer novel, *Bareed* succeeds. This brings me back to the main argument of this thesis, that Alameddine makes violence a character rather than a characteristic, in what I believe is an attempt to appeal to the West, flattening the narratives and making the queer characters in *Koolaid's* unidimensional, interchangeable, and dull.

### **B. Religion, Coming out, and Violence as secondary**

Now back to the chapter at hand. One of the most important aspects of this chapter is its focus on language. The character herself says that "languages are alive" (36) and therefore capable of changing and evolving. She continues to say "People give meanings to words, and people can change the meaning of words, or invent new words altogether, or simply refuse using offensive words. We need to challenge the dictionary in our heads" (36). How do you go about challenging language? If we are to assume it is a living thing, tied into the society employing it, wouldn't fighting to change it involve fighting the entirety of society? It is in these instances where we see the social violence, in the form of a spiral of silence, inflicted upon the queer community, a smaller, less

vocal, and less visible group of people. It becomes increasingly more difficult to speak up as a vocal minority against the silent majority when the consequences involve ostracization and expulsion from the group. *Bareed* touches on this matter very subtly by describing the ways in which the presence of globalizing agents, such as mass media, has acted as a conduit to begin conversations about topics that were and remain taboo. The first chapter tells us of this phenomenon of western influence:

There's more and more talk of homosexuality on TV every year — Western TV more so than Lebanese TV. We watch old episodes of "Will and Grace" and "Friends." We watch news of Ellen DeGeneres getting married to her partner, Lindsay Lohan settling down with her new girlfriend. We clap in excitement as Melissa Etheridge kisses her wife before she goes on stage to accept her Oscar. These celebrities enter our daily lives through our televisions. Yet on Arabic channels, all mentions of homosexuality translate into "shazz." (34-35)

I believe this quote does the very important job of introducing language as a form of violence in the context of *Bareed* but also in the larger context of Arab queerness inhabiting a heteronormative society. We see the disparity between the English and Arabic languages in the discussion of queerness on media platforms including television. Dialmy and Uhlmann's approach to language and to its dealings with sexuality sheds light on the root of the problem:

Indeed, the basic stake in the cultural regime of sexuality in traditional Arab societies has been precisely the construction of two sexual genders—man and not man—emanating from biological sexual identity without being restricted to it in an absolute fashion. The Arabic language itself points in that direction by providing two distinct expressions: 'maleness', which applies to the biological given, and 'manliness', which indicates the construction of man as social domination. As for woman, the term 'femininity' refers at one and the same time to the female and to the woman, that is, to the biological and to the (subordinate) social gender. (3)

Amongst the forms of psycho-social violence most prominent within the queer community is religion. Religion is described as a form of violence not necessarily because it is in fact violent or incites violence, but because it is often interpreted as the

natural enemy of queerness. This particular view which sees religion and queerness as antagonistic is widely spread throughout most, if not all, queer communities around the globe. The reason being the persecution queer people face as a result of being part of societies that subscribe to religion. The depth and integration of religion into a community is very different depending on the society, but in the Arab world, religion and culture are so heavily intertwined that they are often inextricable from one another and heavily influence each other. An example is the unusual fear and hate directed at queer people. In the Arab world, Islam and Christianity are the dominant religions. Both preach the message of love, tolerance, and worship; however, somewhere along the way, as is the case with any religion, politics came into play and the message was lost. In the following excerpts from *Bareed*, we see the way in which many of these queer women grew up in religious households. Their interaction with religion is very similar to but unlike what we see in *Koolaid's*, for their approach to religion is more critical. In *Koolaid's*, the relationship the characters have with religion can be described as teetering on mockery. From the first vignette, we are thrust into the religious theme with the four horsemen of the apocalypse; then there is talk of Arjuna and Krishna, the story of Sodom and Gamora, as well as mentions of different Abrahamic holy books. In general, the importance of religion within *Koolaid's* is undermined by the satirical or irreverent tone employed by Alameddine and his characters. I say teetering on mockery because of the approach employed when discussing religion, which is supposedly a subject one should broach with respect; however, in *Koolaid's*, we are presented with vignettes that are blatantly taking a swing at religion, such as Tom Cruise repeatedly questioning his sexuality while in conversation with Arjuna and Krishna, or one of the four horsemen being foul-mouthed and homophobic.

The following excerpt is from the chapter titled “God’s Will” in *Bareed Mista3jil*: My mother is a devout Muslim woman. Her belief in God is so powerful that she surrenders everything to His will. Anything that happens is because God wills it. And so she didn't question or challenge my homosexuality. "Allah heik ketiblik," [God planned this for you] she said. She told me it made no sense for her to try to change God's will. Shortly after, I told my father, and he had the same reaction: "We cannot change what is God's will. If it is meant for you to change, you will change on your own." This is an odd reaction for Muslim parents, who usually get scared of their children's actions being sinful. But my parents' faith is the source of their compassion and unconditional love towards me and all of their children.

I consider myself a religious woman. I often hear a lot of criticism about being a veiled lesbian. Members of the gay community don't quite understand; they think that homosexuality and religion are contradictory identities. But I am very comfortable with my faith, especially the faith that my parents have set as an example for me. At the end of the day, I am confident that God knows me and understands the deepest parts of me. People often think that Islam is the least tolerant of religions towards homosexuality. But that's a sad misconception that has lately been enforced on us by all the Islamophobia from the West. (83-4; my translation)

What this excerpt does so well is to show us the stark difference with which religion is portrayed in *Koolaid's*, where we see a clear disdain and dislike for queerness: “Fuck this good and faithful servant. He is a non-Christian homosexual, for God’s sake. You brought me all the way out here for a fucking fag, a heathen” (*Koolaid's*, 1). It is important to note that this is the first page of *Koolaid's*, which immediately sets the tone for the whole novel, especially since we are told that the character saying this is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who could be understood as being Jesus, the prophet Mohammad, or even Mohammad’s (the character’s) father. This relates to the previously mentioned approach to religion, in which we see *Koolaid's* address it with a mocking tone.

The narrator of this chapter, who like all narrators in *Bareed* is anonymous, makes another important point near the end when they talk about the spread of Islamophobia from the west. This reinforces the previous points made about *Koolaid's*’s



pandering to a Western audience. This relationship between religion and geopolitics does not completely absolve religion from the hate and violence committed against members of the queer community, as we will explore below, but it does help open the door towards more nuanced discussions of the subject. What does being both queer and religious actually look like?

Another major discussion in *Bareed*, which is also implicitly present in *Koolaid's*, is the concept of coming out. Coming out is usually perceived, in the West, as a fundamental step towards full queerness. By proclaiming your identity to the public, you are not only making a stand, but invoking/demanding visibility. Participating in the social phenomenon expected of queer Western individuals, i.e., coming out, is the equivalent of validating one's own sexuality and beginning to move out of the shadows in order to take a place in society as a queer member. However, this phenomenon is a privilege not found everywhere and is very western in principle. Because of globalization, coming out is becoming a widely spread practice in non-Western societies. To this effect, we see the characters of *Koolaid's* demonstrating this phenomenon; not while in Lebanon, i.e., in their own country, but rather in the US, where being out was necessary. Look at Mohammad for example, who went through his life in Lebanon as an outcast, whether because of his art which was seen as deviant, or his sexuality, which was never divulged to his Lebanese relations but remained a thought in the back of his mind. After moving back to the US, we see a Samir who is deeply entrenched in Western traditions, but once his father comes to visit, he reverts/resorts to his shell. He spends hours de-gayng his apartment so as not to draw attention to himself in any way that may be construed as queer. (On a tangent that is both relevant and entertaining, while writing this particular section of the paragraph, I

was confused by the characters and had them switched. Of course, I'd like to thank my advisor for helping me sort this out, but I would also like to point out that in some way this feeds into the argument I have about the characters being flat and repetitive. The only way I was able to tell them apart was the location they were living in: San Francisco versus Washington). Both of these characters, Mohammad and Samir, continue to hide who they are from their families and friends 'back home' but are out in their current lives in the US. It is not until they contract HIV/AIDS that they divulge this seemingly significant piece of information about their identities. If we are to apply the lens of violence to their situations, we can clearly see the detrimental effects it had on their psychology and social standing. When they were both silent about their sexuality, it caused them internal strife, forcing them to lead double lives, but when they both come out during a time of illness, rather than initiate a healing process, they are even further alienated and add the pressure of external strife, particularly through the family, whether immediate or extended. We see this external strife in both. Despite Samir's parents being accepting, they still attempt at first to hide it for fear of the wrath of the extended family. Whereas coming out is not explicitly discussed in *Koolaid's*, its presence in the liminal spaces of their stories makes it so that its effects are more explicitly expressed. *Bareed* on the other hand does not tiptoe around the subject of coming out. Instead, it is a major theme and is granted its own marker.

Unlike what we see in *Koolaid's*, the theme of coming out in *Bareed* is treated as less of a need to become queer, as it is often perceived in the west, and more of a desire to fit. The dichotomy between Western versus Middle Eastern queer discourses and how each relates to the coming out process is showcased in these texts, raising the question of criteria used to establish queerness: is it applicable on a universal scale or is

it constricted to the locale? Despite all of this, one cannot completely write off the influence of Western media and queer activism on today's queer Arab identity. As Georgis discusses, however, *Bareed* and the characters within are critical of their positions:

To be clear, the authors' accounts are not devoid of Western pride and gay rights discourse, but most of the storytellers seem to resist making a choice between tradition and family (the sites of sexual shaming) and modern queer life. *Bareed* evinces a pronounced hope for a future where the price of gay rights and social freedom is not family ties or religion. In other words, for many of the authors, the loss of group belonging is not a sacrifice they want to make for the right to be "out". (235)

Understanding the rationale behind the authors' convictions brings us now to the discussion of violence and queerness. How so? According to *Koolaid's*, violence is queering, and queerness cannot exist without violence. In *Bareed*, however, the subject is reopened and the *Koolaid's* understanding of the concept is scrapped for a new point of view. The last sentence of the previous quote basically explains it. By not sacrificing family and group belonging, the queer women of *Bareed* have chosen to completely bypass the seemingly essential mechanism for violence; forgoing the assumption that violence creates queerness as is expected in *Koolaid's* and reaffirming the non-exclusive relationship the two have. Violence does not queerness make. Taking that into consideration, we are once again faced with the question of what is queerness then, if not violence expressing itself? I believe the following excerpt from the chapter titled "Becoming" in *Bareed* rightfully highlights the points discussed so far with regard to religion, coming out, and violence (in any of its forms) and adds a further layer to the analysis, creating the necessary foundation for the discussion of violence and queerness:

Growing up in a Maronite family, I was a very religious teenager. I read the Bible three times a day.

At the same time, I knew I was gay since I was six years old. Back then, I defined myself as different...My parents loved me, my friends loved me, and I did great at school. I played the piano, I played a lot of sports, I wrote sappy poetry, I read 10 books a month, I told everyone that I had a crush on this girl or that girl, and everybody thought it was cute. And my favorite thing in the world for seven years was Girl Scouts. My homosexuality, although I didn't have a name for it, never seemed unnatural to me. It was the most natural, most normal part of my being.

Then came that summer between Grade 6 and Grade 7. My classmates changed. The only advice they gave me was to stop announcing it [my homosexuality] to people because it would cause me problems. Problems? I thought. Why would it be a problem? This is how I am. I honestly did not believe that homosexuality was a problem. It was just so natural to me and I was sure it wasn't a problem.

Then, at 14, came the shock of my lifetime. During my daily Bible readings, I came across a passage in Romans 1, a passage that would haunt me for years: "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them."

I read and re-read the passage, hoping every time that I had misread something. But there it was, staring me in the face. I got my Arabic Bible and looked up the verses there and they said the same thing: God gave them up. "Aslamahom Allah."

I was terrified and deeply ashamed. I was shocked by the idea that God had given me up because I loved women. How could that be? It didn't make any sense. Why would God give me up? (53-55)

In this section of the chapter we are introduced to the story of a queer woman and her upbringing. In just a few pages, the authors were able to capture more of the nuances associated with Arab queerness than *Koolaid's* was able to in most of the novel. How so, one may ask? First of all, we have a direct line to the character's psyche and background, instead of having to fish around across timelines, places, and vignettes

(narrative spaces). We are given the necessary information from the get-go, allowing us as readers to formulate a fairly accurate image of who the person talking is. With respect to that, the reader is immediately told the character is very religious, very gay, and very proud. Then there is the transition into the predicament. The character finds a holy text that negates their existence. They experience a moment of psycho-social violence. Unlike in *Koolaid's*, where we see Mohammad's rejection by his father as a major turning point towards queerness; this event is not the reason behind their queerness, but rather an effect of it. Additionally, we as readers are allowed to experience the range of emotions with the characters and empathize with them. In this section, we feel the confusion, worry, shame, and guilt. Shame in particular is of interest because as Georgis mentions in her article:

shame can be a generative resource for Arab queer becoming. Feeling shame, according to Elspeth Probyn, activates what matters... in shame, our worries and concerns about our investments in relationality and belonging come through. As Eve Sedgwick has theorized, shame always happens in relation and thus gets us in touch with our deepest investments in each other. (234)

This investment in expressing the characters' emotions in a more candid pattern allows the reader deeper insight into the queer Arab mentality and unearths some of the shared fears and tribulations in the community. It also highlights important aspects of a queer Arab experience when it comes to experiencing psycho-social violence at a formative age, causing damage in the long run and negatively impacting the lives of most, if not of all, queer Arab individuals.

The chapter continues with another major event in the character's life, one which leads to a combination of psychological and physical violence, forcing her into a reclusive existence and causing her trauma. Like Mohammad's and Samir's 'traumas', they are formative; however, unlike for Mohammad and Samir, the event is more

fleshed out and nuanced, permitting a more profound look into why every queer Arab experience is both unique within its own right but also shares some elements across the board with other queer experiences.

And then, when I was 16, I did the one thing that I would regret for the rest of my life. Naively and without thinking, I was talking to my good friend, the school's Bible teacher, and I told him that I had struggled with my homosexuality and faith.

[He told my mother].

She started breaking plates and glasses on the floor, screaming "Keef bta3imle heik fiyyi?? Mannik tabee3iyyi... 3milit kill shee kirmelik... tlo3ti wild woskha!" "Oumi footi 3a oudtik!" [How can you do this to me? You're not normal...I did everything for you...you turned out to be a dirty child! Go to your room!] she screamed, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me to my room. It was the first time in my life my mother physically hurt me. She banged the door shut and locked me in. For hours, I cried like I had never cried in my life. I could not stop crying. Through the door, I could hear her crying and screaming and breaking things.

In the evening, she barged through the door and dragged me into the bathroom. She had filled the tub with hot water and something -don't know what. She stripped me of my clothes and shoved me into the tub. "Fee shee mish tabee3i feeki, wi7di woskha, baddi in2a3ik hone la tondafi." [There is something abnormal in you, you're dirty, I'm going to let you soak until you're clean.] She locked the bathroom door and I sat in the tub still crying, for three hours. Tashsheit [I wrinkled up] over the hours. I thought of drowning myself in the tub. I tried to hold my breath under the water, but I couldn't. I wanted to die. My life was over, I thought. I wanted to die.

During those two weeks, she took me to the family doctor for a medical checkup. "Shifli shou bihal binit, mareeda," [Check this girl for me, she's sick] she said to him. He checked me and ran tests, and nothing out of the ordinary came out. She took me to a priest, who talked to me for an hour about masturbation and drugs and the horrors of sex before marriage. She took me to an old man, who I think was a psychiatrist, who prescribed pills for me.

And so I went back to school...I was not allowed to interact with anyone... After recess, eight of my classmates moved their seats to the back of the class to sit beside me. The teachers complied. It was the first time I felt empowered by group support and solidarity. For the entirety of the school year, my friends' love and compassion carried me through, as I faced *mockery, disgust, verbal abuse, and physical violence* from everybody around me. (57-60, emphasis added; my translation)

In this selection of the chapter, we see the same character as before experience what can only be described as horror. Her mother finds out she is gay and proceeds to scrub her clean, physically placing her in a bathtub which contained water and what can only be assumed to be some detergent, take her to physicians, psychiatrists, all in an attempt to ‘fix’ her. The excerpt does a great job of presenting to us readers the kind of implications we often find missing in *Koolaid*s, that is, the detailed recounting of the violence queer Arab people may have to suffer through as a result of their queerness. To clarify, the events in *Koolaid*s carry with them a lot of violence; however, unlike the violence we see in *Bareed* it is not a cause but an effect of queerness. As the chapter continues, we see the healing from the psychological violence experienced in the home, which is supposed to be a child’s safe space, with her friends in school. In this moment, we have a similarity between the two texts, the failed familial relationships that the queer characters experience are made up for with what appears to be stronger and more supportive friendships, or as Mohammad says “we build our own family” (103). In the final pages of the chapter, the character discusses the effects of the recreation of important relationships with the people in one’s life that provide the love and support needed. Despite her repeating that she in no way holds the actions of her mother against her, one cannot deny the presence of a constant state of violence following the character, from the home to school and back.

I've learned that organized religion only wants to control people, and that the only true message of any faith is love. No matter how much hatred people throw at you, you just say thank you and give back love. I've learned that with good friends by your side, you can overcome anything. Nine years after my friends stood up to the school administration to demand my right to equal treatment, I started a lesbian support group called Meem, based on the same principles of solidarity and friendship. And that little tomboy who wanted to be a missionary is now an activist for social justice. Every single day, I fight for peace, love, and gender equality. I grew up to be exactly what I always wanted to be. (61)

This detailed recounting of the person's life story creates a nuanced understanding of the intricacies usually associated with the human experience and even more so with a queer Arab existence. The nuances of the queer Arab existence in *Koolaid's* are lacking. The affections and history retold in these chapters are not specific to these characters but rather create a guideline through which a lens to correctly view and comprehend the queer Arab experience can be molded. These nuances which center around characterization, tonality, and comprehensive world creation allow characters to realistically exist as queer Arabs in a more representative format; however, these same nuances are lacking when one attempts to find them in *Koolaid's*. For example, the scene where Mohammad is rejected by his father for the painting of his mother is presented in a very mechanical role play between the two. Unlike what we see above, the whole event, which is not only scarring for Mohammad but foundational for whomever he becomes in the future, is closer to a recital than a true emotional outburst from his father. It almost plays into the trope of the scorned queer artist (he was seven at the time, so not quite an artist or consciously queer yet) in order to meet the criteria expected by a Western audience. The opposite is shown above. We have a detailed recounting of not only the character's emotions and reactions but the parent's as well. Why did her mother reject her? What did she think? How did she act? Calling her own child dirty and then proceeding to wash her or assuming she is physically ill, having her checked by a physician and a psychiatrist. These nuances help better explain (and make the reader understand) the physical, social, and psychological violence experienced by the author of the chapter but, even more so, the source of it. As another character in *Bareed* states: "The Church made a lot of mistakes throughout history. What is the Church but its people? And people make mistakes" (79).



One of the major differences between the two texts lies in the intersection of gender and sexuality. Where we see only gay Arab men speaking in *Koolaid's* and retelling their stories, we have only gay Arab women retelling their stories in *Bareed*. The discussion of gender is often forgone when sexuality is included, but one mustn't forget that they are intersectional, and a queer experience cannot be fully divorced of all its elements. In that respect, I find it important to explore the use of gender in the two texts and its affiliations with violence, the queer experience, and authenticity.

First and foremost, as mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, one must accept that a queer experience cannot be truly universal. It is too intersectional in nature for us to assume that every queer person has had the same (his/her)story. With that in mind, the exploration of gender as one of the aspects of intersection provides depth to the queer experience, a depth usually kept under covers by blanket statements and generalizations. In an Arab society and in the Arabic language, as explained by Dialmy and Uhlmann, there exists two genders: man and not man. They argue that one of the fundamental characteristics of this polarity between the sexual active, the man, and the sexual passive, not man, is the construction of all sexual passives in the image of the woman (2). What this means relates to the previously stated difference between 'manliness' and 'maleness'. Whereas one is considered a gender, the other is biological sex, respectively. The concept of manliness is heavily tied into masculinity and its performance within Arab communities. According to Dialmy and Uhlmann, "masculinity is seen 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" (4). In this regard, the focus on the gender difference between *Bareed* and *Koolaid's* becomes more pronounced. Although queer people are seen as 'not men' in both texts by the society

they inhabit, we have the presence of the masculine male in both as an aggressor and violator. In *Koolaid's*, with respect to the above definition of masculinity, we have multiple acts of violence, which are queer or queering, that are regarded as heteronormative because they satisfy the premise of sexual penetration: Mohammad's rape scene and Nick and Samia's extremely graphic sex scene. In *Bareed*, we have repeated discussions of rape and physical sexual violence in the sense of correctional behavior to the queerness of the characters. In both texts, the person on the receiving end of the violence is always not-man, regardless of sexuality or gender, while the perpetrator is always man, regardless of sexuality or gender. This speaks to the very few similarities found between the two texts and the one implicitly agreed upon characteristic of a queer Arab experience, i.e., the categorization of a violated queer Arab body into not-man. Adding the entirety of what's been said so far in relation to gender, we can infer that once again the psycho-social violence committed against the queer community is palpable and ever present, in the simplest of ways. However, unlike what *Koolaid's* would have us believe, violence is not queering, i.e., it is not a cause for queerness, but more often than not it is a symptom of queerness.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

I started out this thesis with the hope that by the end I will have been able to successfully comprehend and explain the way queer Arab lives are presented in literature, particularly when that literature uses a language that is not Arabic. To that extent, I feel that I have done a good enough job to at least get the discussion surrounding the subject moving forward. After a close reading of the two texts written by queer Arab authors about queer Arab characters and their lives – Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaid's: The Art of War* and Meem's *Bareed Mista3jil* – this thesis delved into an exploration of not only the narratives of the characters but also the presence of certain elements that are essential to creating a comprehensive queer Arab experience in literature, primarily focusing on violence. However, with that in mind, I concede the truth that such a task is not only arduous but only in need of a larger scale of reference, since these two texts barely scratch the surface of what can truly be understood. Furthermore, it is of relevance to mention that despite the depth and breadth of research into this subject, it remains a complex and multilayered undertaking that requires the use not only of literary theory but of psychological, social, media, and trauma theories. Regardless, the above does not take away from any discussion surrounding the influence these texts have on the queer Arab, especially Lebanese, community despite their heavy reliance (one more than the other, as I have consistently argued and shown) on Western concepts and languages.

In that context, understanding that Western queerness and the Western queer community had to go through an accelerated evolution helps place the position of queer

communities elsewhere into perspective with respect to their own growth and the use of the West as a template. It also highlights the immense disparity between the West and the rest of the world in that regard, although western colonialism and imperialism play a major role in setting back developing countries, including their queer 'liberation'. As Massad explains the Gay International, a queer missionary movement, imposes western ideologies, using any means necessary, and forcing the Arab world (and other non-Western countries) into a limited mode of thinking based on a binary of gay versus straight. By doing so, they ensure that the only possible mode of transformation and evolution is through their suggested channel.

In examining *Koolaid*s and *Bareed* my argument focused on western influence, the presence of violence, and the influence both had on these narratives. To a large extent we see that in *Koolaid*s, this creates flat characters that are mere catalysts for the main character of the narrative, i.e., violence. In *Bareed*, we are confronted with a rawer look into the lives and experiences of queer Lebanese individuals where violence is not center stage but just an added feature that colors the narratives. I stand by my initial estimation that if violence were not present in the texts, queerness in *Koolaid*s will all but disappear while in *Bareed* a minimal change would be noticed. This speaks to the vitality granted violence in each text and showcases to what extent they both rely on it as a supplement to queerness. Moreover, by considering the ways through which Western conceptions of queerness pour into non-Western ideologies, one is able to better see the rigidity in identity establishment which only works to further the stigma within non-Western queer communities, the Arab queer community being the case here.

One important point to be remembered is the reality of the community. A queer *community* cannot truly exist because of the discounting of the intersectionality

inherently present in queerness. The use of language is a prime example of this as we see in both texts, where it is employed as a tool for violence and stigmatization, forgoing its primary use as a medium of communication meant to bring people together. Examples from both texts are abundant, but the ones that stick out most are the inability of the characters in *Koolaid's* to express affection in their mother tongue and the slurs endured by the characters of *Bareed*, like “shazz” and “sou7aqiya.”

The one element I tried to focus on in this thesis is that of representation. What does it take to produce as accurate a representation of a queer Arab experience as possible? As I explored above, the queer Arab and violence are always paired together. This implies that violence does what creating a sense of community fails at and establishes an intersectional approach to the queer Arab person; however, it erases many characteristics unique to the experience, thus forcing a very limited viewpoint onto the subject.

Finally, regarding gender, we can see how queer Arabs are often forced into a heteronormative portrayal compliant with gender roles and performances present within outdated societal standards and patriarchal systems. The fact remains that Western queer performativity is the main reference for queer identities globally. There have been many movements to reclaim the queer Arab identity and narrative in order to redefine them in the international queer sphere as a clear refusal of the Western queer values and identities that have simplified and normalized their experience through a liberal terminology and a mainstreamed Western queer performative. The Middle East and the Arab world are far from perfect, nor are they the ultimate safe havens for queer people, but it is still important to criticize the discourses constantly imported from the West and globalized through mass media, social media, and popular TV shows. A domino effect

of the Arab spring has given rise to even more literature regarding queerness in the Arab world, such as Salim Haddad's *Guapa*, which explores similar narratives to the texts in this thesis but within a broader, more distorted environment, heavily reliant on the Arab Spring as an inspiration.

While this thesis is not exhaustive and cannot possibly reference all experiences, individuals/characters, and clashing ideologies, I hope that it has contributed toward a much needed, if not an overdue, discussion of the failures of Western queer discourses when transferred onto Arab (con)texts. These failures are mainly due to the application of a seemingly essential queer theory and are most visible when they effectively prevent the dismantling of the binary of gender and sexuality and the recognizing of identity as a fluid public interface where differences, cultures, and voices should be heard and viewed on an equal level; and narratives are consequently neither erased nor mainstreamed. In that respect, reiterating the necessity to review the differences in representation of Arab/Lebanese queerness as a mirror image of the fluidity of identity performed in society and how violence inserts itself into that equation.

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