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**Binaries without Borders: Performing Genders in Ghalib Halasa's "Al-
Bish'ah"**

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Dedication

To Walid and Yara

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Abstract

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Jordanian author Ghalib Halasa lived the majority of his adult life in transit, being exiled from many countries to do his political beliefs. This exile, however, provided him with a unique perspective with which to represent Jordanian and Arab culture more generally. His short story, "Al-Bish'ah," written earlier in his life, critiques traditional gender roles and binaries, as well as traditional practices which determine honour and justice. Through his telling of a traditional ritual through a powerful mother-figure, Halasa distorts local depictions of gender, and instead inscribes a gender fluidity informed by his lifetime in exile, allowing for a closer depiction of society as he sees it. In this report, I will demonstrate the ways in which Halasa deconstructs traditional gender binaries and traditions through close examination of characters' gender performance, informed by the work of Goffman and Butler. Additionally, I will connect his destabilizing of gender and traditional rituals to his own life and experience, placing the story within the context of his life and Arab culture at large.

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Many writers find themselves easily at home in their writing, as they are able to connect their work easily to the identity and place that location and tradition can provide. Conversely, other authors are in constant transit, in their work and in their lives, integrating foundations from an imagined home, and portraying the familiar at a distance. Jordanian writer Ghalib Halasa lived and wrote outside of Jordan for the majority of his adult life, yet occasionally placed his narratives within its borders. His short story, “Al-Bish’ah” takes his reader back to Jordan through the re-writing of a traditional practice which ascertains what is true and honourable. Through the narrative, he simultaneously welcomes his reader into a Jordanian village and himself returns home, to what is familiar and traditional. However, a nuanced reading of his work demonstrates the way that he defamiliarizes a familiar space through his ability to cause the reader to question their confidence in what is true and honourable, and the way he welcomes us to trouble the foundation of his world, specifically gender norms and the ways which they are defined and performed. To strengthen his claims, he places character of the mother at the center of his story, who through her expected role as a guardian and caretaker, demonstrates a gender fluidity reflected in Halasa’s experience of negotiating tradition in a global context.

Due to the unstable nature of his life, Halasa was exposed to and resided in many countries in the Middle East. As a result, his body of work touches upon many cities and locations, providing a great deal of variety in the cultures he represents on the page.

Halasa's short story "Al-Bish'ah" is one of his few works with a connection to Jordan, and it critiques traditional gender roles through the frame of traditional rituals. In the story, Halasa frames a culture rooted in a gender binary that aligns identity markers and characteristics with strictly delineated notions of what is appropriately considered masculine or feminine. These categories are separated by a bright boundary which segregates those two categories and maps them clearly onto the expected sex. This divide is reflected across society and throughout individual lives, associating aspects society with one of two descriptions.

Literary texts, even those that suggest resistance to this taxonomy, rely upon the distinction. This is why, at initial glance, the short story "Al-Bish'ah" appears to embody and even support these cultural values, underwriting conventional notions of the operations of power and justice within Bedouin society. In fact, Arabic literary scholars interpreted it as such, who state that the story "is not concerned to juxtapose the stagnating traditions operative in the story with any others" and that it "shows how a formalistic attitude to morality results in fear, desolation and a distortion of moral values" (Cobham and Hafez 61-62). However, it is my contention that a character-centered close reading demonstrates a complex array of possible gender performativities available to unexpectedly unconventional characters who perform gender in varying and relational ways.

The short story begins with the question of whether or not this tradition will be performed on Sa' id, a young man accused of cheating on his wife with Zeina, the

daughter of the family living next door. Sa' id (meaning "the happy, or lucky one"), who is married to a plump light-skinned woman named Wardah, has been accused in the village of having a relationship with a woman Zeina who is thin, dark skinned and married to a handicapped man who is completely dependent upon her. The clan of Sa' id and that of the handicapped man are neighbors and on friendly terms as they fought together against other tribes, a bond that is constantly mentioned to relieve the tensions between the two groups. The story opens with a meeting between representatives of the tribe of the handicapped man with Sa' id's family in their home. The sun has set, and it is clear that they have been arguing the whole day about the potential honour violation. Sa' id is not present, but his family is trying to defend him. The most outspoken defender is Sa' id's mother, who points out that her son has a beautiful wife and would not look at the other woman, Zeina, who is not considered beautiful by local standards, due to her colouring and her figure. However, the argument of the mother is not heeded, as the men of both families underline that people in the neighborhood have begun to whisper rumours, and the rumours are what is the most damaging. Therefore, both parties agree that the ritual will be performed.

Knowing that her son is guilty, after the men leave, the mother goes to Sa' id's room, where he is with his wife, and takes him with her to her room. She tells him that she knows that he is a womanizer like his father before him. When he begins to cry, she angrily reprimands telling him that his father never cried and was a real man. Forcefully, she advises him to flee and go with Zeina, having herself already thought out the logistics

of the plan. Nonetheless, Sa' id tells her that Zeina agreed but then changed her mind when her handicapped husband started begging her. When the mother hears this, she begins to shape the outcome of the story, deciding the ways in which she can force her plan into action and ensure her son's safety. So, she orders him to stay in her room and she slips out into the night and returns with Zeina. The mother begins by blaming Zeina for having seduced Sa' id but when Zeina tells her that Sa' id was after her for many months until she succumbed to his advances, the mother realizes that she will need to communicate differently in order to convince Zeina that leaving is the favorable option. And so, the mother acknowledges that this was not Sa' id's first time sleeping with a married woman, and softens her tone, suggesting that Zeina go to Sa' id to help calm him. She leaves the two in the room and goes to sleep but cannot. As she tries to sleep, a dog is barking and a shooting star is seen (both bad omens), and the women complain about that. Suddenly Zeina shrieks and comes out of the room, and states that as she and Sa' id were having sex when she saw the face of her husband in the window. The mother does not believe Zeina's claim that he is nimble at climbing, despite being handicapped. During this surprise, Sa' id is sweating but maintains he is not afraid. Keeping with her motherly treatment of Zeina, she begins to calm her, and a long conversation between them brings both closer to each other, in which they both see how women are the victims in life. Zeina loves Sa' id but is not capable of leaving her husband, however she knows if she does not leave, that Sa' id will get his punishment. After their conversation, the warmth felt by the two women towards each other through their shared relationships with

Sa' id is now something else, a connection between the two women in their suffering. The mother acknowledges that she knew this was going to happen sooner or later, with Zeina or with one of the other women he was chasing and tells Zeina how he slept with the new wife of the Sheikh who could not resist him. She knew that he would be hunted like a hare. As a result of the mother's affection, Zeina decides to go back to Sa' id in the room, implying that she will leave with him.

In order to understand and consider the representation of both gender performance and Jordan, more information about Halasa's life is necessary. He was born in a small town near Amman, called Ma'in in 1932. Halasa's education took place first in Ma'in, then in Madaba, a slightly larger city between Amman and the Dead Sea, before completing his secondary education in Amman itself (Halasa 7). Halasa attended university in Cairo, at the American University of Cairo. Prior to that, he had traveled and lived in numerous countries in the Middle East, including Lebanon and Iraq. These travels allowed him to experience the traditions and ways of life in many Arab countries, a fact reflected in his work through the variety of locations he sets his stories in, as well as his use of many different dialects to represent his characters. During this time, Halasa was politically involved, which caused him to move from country to country, before spending a great deal of his life in Egypt, where he started the magazine *Gallery 68* with fellow author Edward Kharrat. Politically, he was a Marxist and participated in communist parties in many countries such as Jordan and Iraq. While in Egypt, he participated in the popular militias formed by Nasser in 1956 to resist the tri-partite

invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel, but did not see much fighting. He then was forced out of Egypt by the government, as he was supportive of the Palestinian cause and against the Camp David Accords, causing him to be kicked out of Egypt after he organized a conference about the subject (Abu Nidal). He left to live in Syria, where he resided in Damascus until his death in 1989 (7). He was unable to return to Jordan due to a law which sentenced communists to a 15-year sentence in prison, and the proof of communism was as simple as owning a book by Marx or Lenin. Halasa refused to compromise his opinions or portray himself in a way that was untruthful, and as such even after the law was lifted, there was still trouble with arranging his return to Jordan. Permission for his return was only extended after his death. The fact that Halasa spent the majority of his adult life not only outside of Jordan, but moving constantly from one Arab country to another, shows the instability of his life, as well as how exile shaped it. Leaving was not his choice, but rather one made for him. The exilic nature of his life informs the lens through which I will interpret the story, and his portrayal of gender fluidity as universal within the Arab world.

The short story “Al-Bish‘ah” was originally written in 1956, which marked Halasa’s last trip to Jordan before he left for Egypt a second time. The year 1956 was an important moment for Arab Nationalism, due to The Suez Crisis. That year, the Egyptian government took control over the canal, and shut out Israeli ships from utilizing it, and in response, the British Government sent troops into Egypt to try and take the canal back by force. Eventually, under the leadership of the first UN peacekeeping mission, all troops

withdrew (Hourani 365). This event drew together many people under the umbrella of Arab Nationalism as they stood with Egypt under Western pressure. The story was not published until 1968, a big year for artists and intellectuals globally, where it was printed in Cairo by Dar al-Thaqafah al-Jadidah, a leftist publishing house (Abu Nidal 95). “Al-Bish‘ah” is one of Halasa’s few works which scholars often interpret as explicitly set in Jordan. While this seems to be the case at initial reading, I will demonstrate that Halasa’s portrayal of the ritual and gender performance casts a wider net which extends to the numerous places he resided in within the Arab world.

The title of the short story, “Al-Bish‘ah,” literally translates as “the ugly one” in the feminine. However, the title has two meanings, one local, and one shared. Within the story, the title itself refers to an older, traditional practice within Jordanian tribes that aims to determine whether someone is being untruthful. This ritual is still practiced today, and, according to an Egyptian officiant of the ritual in the MBC news report, “*Taqrīr ‘an “al-Bish‘ah”* (Report on *al-bish‘ah*), it originally comes from the traditional practice of Jordanian Bedouins, and other Bedouins within the region (0:40-0:43). In this practice when there is a rumour that a person has committed a crime related to honour (like having sex with a married woman or a widow), and (although not convicted) dishonours the family, a piece of coal or iron heats in a fire until it becomes red and then swiftly touches the tongue of the accused. The title of the ritual refers to the stone used within the ritual, and the femininity of the name is possibly due to the femininity of the Arabic word for rock *ḥajarah* (حجر) onto which the adjective *bish‘a* acts. It is literally

and grammatically feminine, like word for the stone used to perform the ritual. The video of a performance of the ritual demonstrates this connection between the adjective and the rock, in which the officiant calls the stone *al-bish'ah* as he places it in the fire (2:08-3:05). In contemporary usage, the verb *basha'* can mean to disfigure (Hans Wehr 74). However, historically, the verb meant, among other definitions, to choke or to leave a bad smell in the mouth, which a burning tongue would do, thus possibly leading to the term's use as an adjective for the rock, as the literal object which causes the smell (Lisan al-Arab 289).

The ritual begins with the men gathering around the performer of the ritual, the *mubashshi'* (مبشع), which literally translates as the doer of the *al-bish'ah*, and discussing the nature of the crime, with both parties (the accused and the accuser) present. The *mubashshi'* then places a large, circular stone with a handle into a fire, and as soon as it becomes hot enough, he pulls it out of the embers and bangs it three times, to show the sparks that fly from it, ensuring the temperature. The accused then licks the stone three times, in plain view of the *mubashshi'*, who then pours water from a yellow pitcher onto the stone to cool it, before checking the tongue of the accused. If the tongue is burnt, then the male is guilty and the burned tongue is his punishment and this ritual restores the family's honour. If his tongue does not burn, then he is innocent. The logic behind the ritual is that any accused, who believes in this practice, betrays through his dry mouth that he is terrified when guilty, or he remains innocently calm as demonstrated by the saliva in his mouth that helps mitigate the heat (Halasa 13). The ritual may only be

performed on men, due to its association with honour. Culturally, honour is ascribed to men and women are the objects of honour. Women are passive in such cases and are denied agency, and are thereby spared this particular ritual. In interesting contrast, however, the actual object which determines justice within the ritual, the rock, is feminine in gender, and it is the rock which tests and in either outcome, restores honour to the man.

The title of the story, being the Jordanian name for the ritual, is the only explicit indication that the story is set inside of Jordan. However, as underlined by the MBC segment on the ritual, it is called *al-bish'ah* in parts of Egypt as well, specifically Upper Egypt. Although Halasa did live in Cairo, he probably encountered the ritual in his small hometown in Jordan, rather than southern Egypt. Furthermore, the same ritual exists in neighboring nomadic communities, but under different names. For example, in parts of Palestine, the ritual is called *naar al-baraa`ah* (the fire of innocence), which is a far more literal name than the Jordanian term. However, except for the title, there are no other markers of place within the text. Most strikingly, the dialogue is written completely in Modern Standard Arabic, rather than Jordanian Colloquial Arabic. The usage of Modern Standard Arabic rather than Colloquial Arabic allows the story to seem placeless and is especially striking since the majority of the author's other works rely upon the use of Colloquial Arabic dialogue. This lack of place connects to the author's life, as Halasa spent many years in different countries, and was not allowed to return to his home country. Moreover, this lack of colloquial dialogue links to the surrounding events in the

Middle East at the time. The strength of Arab nationalism in the year Halasa wrote the story was strong, and by not specifying a place, Halasa aids to this movement through unifying the experiences of the story and not including specific space markers.

From the outset of the short story, the characters and setting display and emphasize a clear gender binary, demonstrating the ways in which gender is perceived culturally. There are masculine and feminine spheres within the society, and the descriptions make the binary clear during the first scene of the story, in which the two families gather in a house, discussing the possibility of the affair. The very setting and context of this first scene embodies the clarity and legibility of the gendering of places, spheres, and events. While there is one woman present, the mother, all other speakers in the scene are male. It is of note that the woman who is involved is a widow. The role of the widow in society depends upon religion, however in this story due to the use of Islamic phrases, it is clear that the families are Muslim. When a male dies, his house and land are inherited by his male descendants, if there are any, usually the sons, or brothers if there are no sons. The eldest son receives priority and inherits the house. In some cases, the younger siblings would also inherit parts of the house or land and they would live with their oldest brother. According to Jordanian law, the mother inherits very little and not the house. However, custom dictates that the mother stays in the house with the eldest brother, which has traditionally caused many problems with the daughter-in-law. Mothers are supposed to continue serving their sons even after the death of their husband. This fact shows an interesting connection between the character of Sa' īd and his dead father,

who cause his mother so much pain. As the son inherits the role of the father after his death, he can inherit other qualities that he associated with his father, such as his philandering, thus explaining his behavior. Through his unfaithful actions, Sa' id imitates the man whose power he has inherited. In a sense, however, they meet in the mother's house since Sa' id imitates not so much his father's power as his dishonour. It is in order to judge him that the families gather in what functions as the *mother's* house, where they perceive her as, and she acts as the eldest member of the family. With her as a notable exception, however, this gathering, which intends to decide the guilt of Sa' id, involves only the men discussing what to do, and why they should do it, while women bake bread in the other room (Halasa 11).

This division between men as the decision makers and women as relegated to their own space, one which includes housework, arises again during the tail end of the discussion, in which one character says, “واعلف الدواب” (Go feed the animals) (14). To which another man replies, “النسوة سيقمن بذلك” (The women will do that) (14). Again, this brief encounter emphasizes the existence of the gendered binary within society, specifically in the fields of decision-making and housework, in which the former falls into the realm of the masculine and the latter falls into that of the feminine. Therefore, the mother stepping out of her role as the submissive widow, leaving the housework to other women. Sitting with the men who are engaged in discussion, she begins to show the ways in which she is able to navigate gender performances in order to exist within different societal spheres, which is to say different gendered performances and spaces to

which she as a woman would normally be denied access. By detaching herself from the feminine work and sitting amongst the men, she claims power for herself.

Later, the mother will revisit the traditional characterization of women as submissive to men, and thus lacking control over others or even themselves, when she recalls her wedding night, and what she experienced at the hands of her husband. She states, in conversation with Zeina, that he beat her until she could not move and then raped her. The next morning, when people saw what he had done to her, they said, “إنه .. عرف كيف يسوسها” (He is a man, he knows how to tame her) (24). The people, including women, show no concern for her, rather they applaud her husband for the way that he controls his wife and forces her to submit to him. This moment shows quite starkly the gender binary and the set roles of men and women culturally. Power and control play an important role in defining gender, and both fall to the male. Women are the object of power and control; in the same way they are the objects of honour.

Later in another heated moment in the discussion, while they are deciding if the possible outcome of the *al-bish'ah* ritual outbalances the risk of burning an innocent man, demonstrates the gender binary as one rather impassioned man says the following, “لن نسكت والله على الضيم , لن نسكت والله على الضيم ولو سال الدم كالأنهار . النساء يسكتن .. النساء فقط يسكتن” (“I swear to God that we will not remain silent, I swear to God that we will not remain silent and let injustice stand, even if blood flows like rivers. Women remain silent...only women remain silent!”) (14). This statement demonstrates quite clearly the

view of women, and their separation from men. The whole argument consists of statements which portray women in a negative light, in contrast to men, and epitomizes the way in which society sees the feminine as both separate from, and lesser than, the masculine. According to the statement, women do not speak to justice. At best they remain silent, and allow wrong doings to occur, at worst they deserve to be blamed as the cause. In this quote, the man clearly sees being silent as negative, as dishonourable and ignoble, as he advocates for the performance of the ritual. Literalizing the gendered stakes of the ritual, a guilty man is silenced as his tongue burns, leaving him in the same space of silence as women. He then associates the silence with women, stating that only they are silent in the face of justice. Thus, he attributes silence and impotence in the face of injustice with the feminine, and taking action and enacting justice with the masculine. The speaker here advocates for justice by trial, for forcing the truth about the affair to come out. Even if the assembled men elected not to perform the ritual, he associates any act of being silent, of not attempting to find justice, with the inadequate passivity of the feminine since “only women remain silent” and allow these sorts of injustices to occur around them. The performative gender binary is further identifiable by the separation that exists in the characterization of the discussion as taking place in a masculine space. The feminine speech, which should take place in a feminine location allows for injustices to take place, whereas he insists upon the masculinization the space through a gendering of speech itself, reminding the mother that her sport of speech and performance violates a divinely ordained decorum.

The man's impassioned words align the masculine and feminine with speech and silence respectively. When in the company of men, women should remain silent, repressing their own desires and acquiescing the men's whims however destructive they may be. With the exception of the mother, the story does not show women speaking to men, limiting their vocality to female spaces. They chat with each other when they are making bread in the opening of the story and later, while working in the kitchen, quiet the dogs. Their speech is only possible in feminine spaces, such as the kitchen, or the house itself, assuring that public femininity becomes associated with silence. Men are the dictators, wielding the power of speech, over women who, as least in mixed company, are expected to remain subdued in silence.

In relation to the idea of silence, another binary exists in the depiction of sight and gaze. There is a fair amount of discussion of looking, and of the gaze, as connected to power. Culturally, it is men who are able to look wherever and whenever they please, while women must always look down, avoiding the gazes of others, especially men. If society constrains their gaze, they are additionally hidden from the gaze of others; they are unseen and inhabit hidden, interior spaces, the kitchen and the house, where they can remain out of the masculine gaze, while men take on the public sphere. This topography of watching and being watched is further enforced by female religiously imposed dress, such as the *hijab* or *niqab*, which are aimed to hide women from male gaze. As women inhabit these publically invisible spaces, and are associated with silence, they are

rendered almost invisible with relation to society at large, while men are found in the opposite space and are associated with speech and visibility.

The mother, who should fall into the feminine side of the clear gender binary within Jordanian culture, performs her identity in ways which emphasize the idea of gender as a continuum along which and through which she can trouble that very binary through her transgressive performances. As a now-single mother, she performs in both masculine and feminine spaces, thus displaying the ways in which she is self-aware of her gendered performance through her transitions, which occur when she assumes gender performances that will supply her with a power that the others cannot. Within the story, there are moments in which she performs in ways that render her identity legible in terms of that continuum beyond the range usually assigned to her biological sex. Utilizing different performance strategies, she exerts agency in situations where she would not necessarily have any where she solely to perform an expected feminine identity. Interestingly, she is never given a name in the story, and is only referred to as “the mother” (al-um). Her name is therefore relational, not personal, emphasizing that who she is depends on where she is and who she is with. By contrast, the other two main characters, Zeina and Sa‘īd, are named. The strategic de-personalizing of the mother, the removal of the personal name that would represent her individuated identity, places more emphasis on her performances as a mother, and provocatively in the scene with the men in her house as surrogate father, negotiating the range of identities that can be performed within the constraints of culturally gendered roles. Other characters have a deluded

individualism, which is epitomized by their personal names. They imagine themselves as being distinct and independent figures, while the mother in her relational identity, avoids that mirage. Her resistance to being a single named subject, allows her to be everyone to everybody and permits her trans-gendered performances to be enacted as she sees appropriate for the situation. The mother is someone who is not placed, similar to the author himself. Halasa traveled from place to place, and was banned from his own country, thus leaving him to move throughout his life. The mother as non-placed reflects Halasa's separation from a specific place, or rather, as a person who belongs to many places, and thus reflects a similar image in terms of the specific location of the story- there is not one. The mother, who can be anyone to everyone, like Halasa, and the location of the story, could be a number of places in the Arab world, or it could be all of them.

The presence and variety of the mother's performances is a persistent concern in the story, one that invites not only recognition of their presence but analysis of their precise nature and narrative and interpretive implications. The manner in which characters perform their gender identities relies upon the ways in which they are defined not as projections of an interior self, but as a self that is constructed interactively. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, outlines the way in which human beings perform their identities in social interactions. He begins by stating that our opinions of others are predicated upon information we know from before, which defines our expectations. However, during a social interaction, we gain information both about

the individual and/or about their situation (Goffman 1). There are two factors which inform someone's impression of a person, namely the impression they give, which is based on the extent to which they conform to known societal expressions, and the impression they project, which emerges from the doer's idiosyncrasies (2). Since all identities are performed, Goffman argues that individuals are accepted on faith, as they present themselves (2). The way this acceptance on faith manifests itself for gender involves high stakes for identity performance within Arab culture as the alignment with an assigned gender is crucial to acceptance within society.

Additionally, Goffman underlines that when someone is around others, there are reasons to behave in a particular way in order to convey a specific impression (4). As such, people change their performance to suit various situations, in order to make the impression necessary for the specific context of their performance. The mother demonstrates this change in her performance, which alters in different situations in order to convey different impressions to those around her. Society expects that people be who they claim to be, and that if there is hesitation regarding their authenticity that they be given the benefit of the doubt (13), and so people are more often than not accepted in their performances. This acceptance of individuals on faith is widely understood, and therefore there are often motives, whether conscious or unconscious for someone to behave the way they do (6). Essentially, Goffman suggests, everyone, always, in every situation, is playing a role, and people know each other as roles (19).

Goffman's initial work on gender has been greatly expanded upon in the context of numerous identity markers. With regard to gender, Judith Butler's work has troubled the work of Goffman by moving into the performance of gender. Her work *Gender Trouble* aids in addressing the relationship between gender and culture, and additionally, the way gender itself is performed, as a part of identity. When addressing the content of "Al-Bish'ah," perhaps the starting off point should be a quote Butler herself includes, from a work by Mary Douglas, which states:

"ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (Butler, Norton Anthology 2544).

Butler's insight that logics of separation perform social functions offers insights into the nature and implications of the gendered qualities of the *al-bish'ah* tradition. The clear binary that exists within Jordanian Islamic culture allows for the ritual itself to exist. The gender binary allows for a way to tidy or control society, to impose a system on an otherwise messy gender continuum, and it does so in a literally embodied way. Butler continues and discusses the emergence of cultural values as an inscription on the body, and the body as a canvas for these inscriptions, however for this process to occur, the

medium must be destroyed and places into the domain of values. The body is the medium through which culture emerges (2543).

Later, when discussing gender as performative, Butler begins to describe gender as being placed in time, as a series of acts which then produce a general idea of gender (2552). Constant performance of identities, including gender, creates the illusion of an interior and organizing core, or identity, of which gender is a part, an illusion which Butler describes as “discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (2549). Butler goes on to add that, “Genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (2549). The different acts of gender then create the conception of gender that exists in society, and without the performances, there would be no ideas of gender (2551). This idea complements and develops Goffman’s account, in suggesting that identity as a whole, as well as people’s notions of their own identities and the identities of those around them, are based on repeated and believed/believable performances.

When explaining how the idea of gender as performative is a function of the way that culture perceives or represents gender, Butler underlines that gender is constantly connected to history, class, race and other markers, and as a result there cannot be separation between gender and the political and culture (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 6). While her work clearly relies upon the existence of a gender continuum, an idea which will be explored with regards to “Al-Bish‘ah,” Butler also mentions that the

heterosexualization of desire is what creates opposition between feminine and masculine and allows for the extension from those categories to the identifiers of male and female (23). The effect of this heterosexualization of desire is the binary cultures which see gender and sexuality as an either/or and link the two concepts with one another, as Arab culture does. There is a clear divide between the masculine and the feminine, and a direct correlation between the two adjectives and the gender roles of men and women.

Identity is, in Butler's theory, a performance. Gender is performed in real time while identity, although stable, exists outside of time and of its iterated performances. While identity may exist somewhere, in the experiential world there is no concrete identity only its performances. These performances of gender, however arbitrary, nevertheless create gender, or the idea of gender, whose power is unrelated to the arbitrariness of its signification. We are forced by society to perform gender according pre-existing terms; such performance is mandatory if we are to be in the world and takes place in a public space and depends upon its recognition by others in order to exist. Butler resists linking gender performance to one specific gender idea. "Doing" gender consists of a series of performative acts repetitively displayed in public under duress. Gender is script that must be repeated over time and mistakes can't be viewed in a system of gender binary (33). The performativity of gender leads to the impossibility of a fixed gender binary, as gender is performed in time, constantly changing and proliferating well beyond what would be possible within any binary. As Butler so succinctly puts it, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid

regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (43).

During the discussion between the two families in the beginning of the story, the mother’s speech and her role as the primary speaker of her family allow her to enact elements of a masculine performance. Firstly, she is the only female arguing, in a group of men, both younger and older than her, all of who could potentially exert authority over her. However, she stands her ground and demands agency through her complex, transgressive, and idiosyncratic performance of gender during the meeting. She is arguing with other men over the future of her family, while no women from the either family are present, let alone able to speak. In performing this gender transgression, she claims agency in the situation. She is able to take on this performance because of her connection with her son and his father, a relationship which she translates from one of subordination to one of appropriation, as in this moment she is doing all that she can to help him avoid the ritual. Culturally, the bond between mother and son is one of the strongest, and it is assumed that as a mother, she would do anything in her power to help her son, including taking on such a troubling performance to ensure her presence at such an important discussion which could change his life.

The mother begins her transit by attempting to identify with the male perspective, and demonstrating the ways in which she understands the male point of view when it comes to women. The first instance of this performance is when she begins to discuss how ridiculous the rumours are in her opinion, because of the difference between her son

Sa' id's wife, and the neighboring family's daughter, Zeina. The mother states, comparing the two women, "هل تظنون ابني يهجر فراش امرأة بيضاء وسمينة يسيل لعاب من ، " (Do you think my son would leave the bed of a fair, plump woman, who makes any man who sees her drool, leave his bed and soft cushions, to be familiar with a dark woman as skinny as a dried-up stick?) (Halasa, 13). She goes on to ask whether her son has gone blind, as a possible reason why her son would leave his plump and fair woman. Here, the mother is using her knowledge of conventional cultural perceptions of womanhood and beauty in order to perform as masculine. With this statement, she invokes relationality, over female gender solidarity. She knows her son, but men know men better than women know men. Since her identity performance is strategic, not essential to who she is, she is easily able to adopt the male voice and performing in it. By vocalizing the cultural opinion that fair, curvier women are more attractive, the mother attempts to ally herself with the masculine point of view, demonstrating that she understands, or at the very least mimics, their way of thought. The mother then uses this to defend her son, stating that due to the general opinions on attractiveness of women, the son would not leave his beautiful, plump and fair wife for a skinny, dark-skinned woman, like Zeina. Thus, the mother here utilizes a masculine performance in order to give her words more weight, and to give authenticity to her defense of her son.

In addition to performing in a way which emphasizes her ability to understand male thought within society, while making her argument, she counters the men with the

same type of argument that they are making and engages in topics that highlight what are seen as negative qualities of women. For example, after a man from the other family discusses how others gossiping about them would be shameful to the family, and cause them to have to look down at the ground as they walk around their town, not making eye contact with those around them. The men from the other family place need for doing *al-bish'ah* on the rumours that are spreading, discussing the alleged affair and stating, quite plainly, “كلام الناس هو الذي نود أن نمنعه” (Gossip is what we want to prevent) (Halasa, 13). It is of note that when he discusses not making eye contact, directly after the quote above, he states that he does not want to have to turn his gaze when he meets men (*rijal*) on the street, further underlining the gender binary present in the culture, it is the men’s gaze that is important, that casts the final judgment.

In response to the words of the elder male family member, the mother responds by inquiring who would be able to prevent men from talking. This statement invokes the distinction between masculine and feminine spaces in the society and the related roles men and women are given. Speech and visibility are masculine, and therefore the only people who could stop men from talking are other men. This statement shows that the mother is aware of the masculine power in society, and that all submit to it, perhaps working to inflate the egos of the men and play on their self-importance as she fights for her son.

However her performance in this instance, fighting for her son as the “head” of her family, aligns with notions of masculinity within the culture, and to heighten her

performance as masculine, she associates gossip, and its negativity, with women, essentially separating herself from the category of women in general in her speech, as she says, “النساء يتكلمن كثيراً, فالمرأة عقلها في أسفل وإن لم تجد من يدوس على ذيلها فستقول ما يحلو” (Women talk a lot, and their minds are on the ground: if no one is there to step on a woman’s tail, she will say whatever they please.) (Halasa, 14). The mother continues in this tone, underlining the shortcomings of women, and blaming gossip on her own gender, while simultaneously separating herself from it. It is clear here that society associates gossip with the feminine, as a lesser type of speech. Women’s gossip and talk, talk that in a sense only serves to hurt, is distinguished from the talk of men, who are associated with justice and honour. Gossip is not honourable, and therefore not masculine. Thus, leading to its association with femininity, and something mindless women do.

In using this type of speech, adopting the features of male speech, using its words, and then expanding on them further, she is performing masculinity in her manner of speaking and her self-separation from the female gender. More specifically, she rejects their “inferior” minds and their inherent desire to spread gossip if there are no repercussions. Within this discussion, as she represents her family, the mother’s gender performance legitimizes her presence and gives power to her words. Although the performance is successful, her argument is not. She is unable to convince the families that performing *al-bish‘a* is not necessary, and the decision is made to carry out the ritual.

After the decision is made, the mother continues to perform even more outside of her culturally prescribed gender-role through her conspiracy. As soon as *al-bish'a* is confirmed, the mother begins to plan for her son Sa' id to leave with his mistress Zeina. She is aware of his guilt and anticipates that he will be burned by the stone if the ritual is performed. Thus, she begins to plot for him to leave that very night in order to avoid the ritual all together. The way she contrives for her son to leave demonstrates a further breaking of the gender binary as she takes control of the male who should societally have control over her. While the act of plotting itself could be construed as feminine, as it is done secretly and seeks to remain unseen, the fact that she is plotting to dictate her son's life and control him places the act in a masculine space. Masculinity as described above thrives on control, and here the mother is plotting to exert control over her son, over the male who should have control over her. In Jordanian society, after a woman is left widowed her eldest son, or her eldest brother, become responsible for her. In such a cultural framework, her plotting and taking control of her son's future is a markedly masculine performance. The mother is deciding the fate of a man who, by society's standards, should decide hers. Her actions display an adept navigation of the gender continuum for her benefit, as she steps outside her feminine role and performs the masculine of aider and protector of herself and her family.

Indeed, she does not limit her interventions to the potentially gender-neutral role of protector of a child, as she moves on to assert her authority over her surviving male. While confronting her son, the mother scolds him on his lack of masculinity, berating

him for crying when faced with potential of being forced to undergo the ritual. I will address this moment later in the paper as an example of Sa' id's gender performance, however in this instance, we see the mother again manipulating cultural gender norms in order to perform as masculine. As with her description of women's gossip, she calls upon the required masculine qualities within the pejorative binary and compares her son to his father, connecting the two as equally unfaithful during their marriages. Unlike Sa' id, she remarks, his father did not cry, as real men do not cry (18). Just as before, she grounds her performance on the gender binary. However, here she does it in reverse. Rather than performing in the masculine, which might entail validation of sexual infidelity, or at least its excusing, she instead takes on the rather stereotypical role of the betrayed wife and disappointed mother. At this point, she has not yet spoken of her plan for Sa' id and Zeina to run away together, and she insists (drawing on an almost stereotypical version of a Jordanian mother) that he endure a scolding for his reaction to the ritual. Here she performs in an almost excessively feminine manner, highlighting the culturally constructed nature of the bond between a mother and her son, while at the same time using that manner to emphasize her displeasure. She calls upon traditional gender roles, both masculine and feminine, within the cultural binary in ways which grant her control of the situation, bestowing up her power a power to which she would otherwise have no access, in that suspended moment before she suggests that her son run away with his mistress. The act of running away, and its planning, shows the most obvious link to Halasa's life within the story. He was exiled from numerous countries, forced to flee for

his political views, and thus through the images of planning and leaving, Halasa exposes his own experiences of fleeing and connects his own life to the story.

Until this point, the confrontation between the mother and Sa' id, the mother's performance has been gendered masculine. Throughout the argument between the two families, the mother performs in a way that the societal gender binary would consider masculine. However, in this scene, she is altering her performance, so as to inhabit and portray an excessive version of who society fashions and expects her to be. As she alternates between performances, it becomes clearer that the mother is agilely and smoothly navigating the continuum through her performances. Her gender performance oscillates between degrees of masculinity and femininity, using varying degrees of both depending on the situation.

Throughout the rest of the story, the mother navigates fluidly between masculine and feminine gender performances. After the confrontation with her son, she goes to find Zeina, who Sa' id has said refuses to leave with her (18). Upon first interacting with Zeina, the mother blatantly states that she does not understand Zeina's appeal as sexual or romantic object, "إنني أستغرب ما الذي دعا ابني أن يقع في هواك , فأنت سمراء وممصوصة , كالعيدان الجافة , وقد اخترت له امرأة بيضاء وسمينة ."
(I wonder what made my son fall in love with you, you are dark and thin as a dry stick, whereas I had chosen a fair, plump woman for him) (19). She goes even further, even after Zeina does not respond, adding, "لو كنت رجلا ما نظرت إليك قط . ماذا يريد الرجل من قفة عظام ؟ هل صنعت له تعويذة حتى ؟"
(If I were a man, I would never have looked at you. What does a

man want from a bag of bones? Did you cast a spell on him so that you could take over his mind?) (20). With this aggressive, disparaging, and thoroughly misogynist assertion, the mother begins her conversation with the same performative tactics that she utilized in the earlier family discussion. She attempts to dominate Zeina by mimicking a masculine mindset, implying through her descriptions that a woman's worth depends upon her physical attractiveness, while disparaging Zeina's appearance, her skinny body and dark skin, as unappealing, especially as compared to Sa' id's conventionally beautiful current wife, Warda. This performance seeks to assert power over Zeina, to use confrontation as a means to encourage Zeina to leave with Sa' id, but her first gambit fails. Zeina does not react to the mother's crude comments with any sort of submission. When she replies, she is matter-of-fact and explains how and why the affair happened, and how she is haunted by it. She even rejects her own complicity, claiming that it was "fated" as if it happened by no fault of her own (20). The mother, as she considers this response, realizes Zeina's guilt about what she is doing with Sa' id, and this recognition allows the mother to adopt a different approach to gain power within the conversation and relationship.

Her guilt, Zeina explains, stems from the fact that she is essentially the caregiver to her sick husband, whom she believes is aware of the affair Sa' id together at one point. It is not adultery that disturbs her, but her betrayal of the feminine obligation to care for the weak and the ill. Even if she leaves with Sa' id, therefore, Zeina will not be free of her husband or her obligations. She fears that she will be haunted by her husband, as if her departure will lead to his death. Once Zeina's concerns are made clear, and her

committedly unorthodox views in feminine virtue are made clear, the mother alters her performance since assertions of masculine authority will not convince Zeina to leave with her son.

Putting aside the role of masculine berating of a fallen woman, the mother chooses to comfort Zeina instead, switching once again from masculine to feminine. She allows Zeina to rest her head in her lap, and she plays with her hair, calming her down (24). In that same moment, she also admits to herself that Zeina's body is far curvier than she thought, perhaps seeing her earlier claims about Zeina's appearance as incorrect. However, in this action, in holding Zeina in her lap and playing with her hair, she acts in a soothing manner, performing in a feminine, especially maternal, way, as she shows sympathy to Zeina. Through this action, she regains control of the situation, she is the one helping Zeina, who sits sad and guilt-ridden in her lap. As a continuation of this feminine performance, she says,

“هذا حكم على المرأة يا ابنتي، أن تنال قليلا من المتعة وشقاء له . إنها تستلقي
ويعلوها الرجل ويذلها . عليها أن تتحمل آلام الوضع والحبلى ... إنني أفكر في حياتي
فلا أجد غير العذاب والمهانة . في ليلة زفافي الأولى دخل علي المرحوم وهو عابس
... فتناولني بالعصا ولم يتوقف إلا عندما أغمي علي . ثم أخذني وأنا على هذه الحال
”...

(“It is a dictate for women, my daughter, to get a little enjoyment and endless misery. She lies back and the man gets on top of her and humiliates her. She must endure the pains of giving birth and pregnancy, ... I think back on my life and find nothing but torment and humiliation. On the first night of my wedding, my late husband, entered the room frowning, he beat me with a cane and did not stop until I fell unconscious. Then he took me when I was in that state...” (24).

The mother's performance connects gender solidarity with familial loyalty as she aligns herself with her "daughter" Zeina. Through her powerful speech, the mother recalls her own experiences as a young woman, the night of her wedding during which she was beaten and raped. The mother identifies with Zeina, showing her that, while her helplessness is different from Zeina's situation, they are both as women helpless in their lives and expected to succumb to the wills of men. The mother is being forced to endure pain at the hands of her husband, and Zeina is being forced to care for and live with a disabled older man whose care must be her whole life. With the example of her wedding night, the mother links both her own abjection and the squandering of Zeina's life to the general plight of women, destined to live under male command.

By offering so characteristically gendered a performance, once again boldly emphasizing the strict gender norms of society, the mother outlines for Zeina her situation and its participation in the strictly gendered binarism that enforces limited and even abject roles onto women. The airing out-loud of these examples shows Zeina how hopeless her current life is, pushing her to change the dire state of her current circumstances by leaving. The speech succeeds, and Zeina responds by saying she will go to Sa' id, and leave with him. While the story is left with an open ending, Zeina affirms her plan to find Sa' id, and implies that she hopes to depart with him (25). Through the very adoption of a standardized feminine posture the mother actually transcends the binary she is emphasizing. By acting feminine she becomes an agent. By forging the solidarity with Zeina, she convinces her to leave with her son. Her mature performance of

the classical role of concerned and nurturing mother, as she strokes Zeina's hair and confides in her about her own life, makes it possible for her to act on her own behalf, and perhaps even for Zeina to act independently as well, leaving behind culturally and spatially the limits that society has set.

Moving smoothly across gender boundaries and beyond socially circumscribed limits for female agency, the mother is able to perform gender in numerous ways, claiming autonomy and at the same time revising the model of gender itself. Her use of a fuller full range of potential selves from a continuum of gender possibilities, allows her control of and authority over those around her. Her goal of attaining autonomy within her social and familial context, and of realizing concrete goals against the grain of male consensus, depends on her performances asserting a masculinized power despite her inherent position of powerlessness as a female in the society. Equally, she acknowledges and deploys her weakness as woman in a male-dominated society, precisely so as to claim an unexpected agency which allows her to cultivate those whom (like herself as a young woman) masculine aggression would only silence.

Those whom the mother cultivates, not only tend to do as she wishes, they also begin themselves, although not always consciously, to demonstrate through actions and words a surprising gender fluidity. The mother's revelation of a gender continuum through her gender performances, appears again in her son, Sa' id, however on a smaller scale. While he is not present for most of the story, the public image of Sa' id and the Sa' id with whom his mother interacts come across as quite different. From the outset,

Sa' id is the topic of conversation. He is the reason that the two families have gathered together as they seek to determine whether he is having an affair with Zeina and whether the ritual should be performed on him. The reader sees his mother and brother fighting for him, however he is not present.

Later, near the end of the story, when the mother is speaking with Zeina, she describes her wedding night, and repeats the public image of her son in the following way:

“كان ذلك لا بد منه ، إن لم تكوني أنت فسوف تكون أخرى . كنت أعلم أن ذلك لا بد منه .. منذ أن كان طفلاً كنت أعلم ذلك .. أرى عينيه والنظرة النافذة فيهما التي تشبه المخرز فيتوقف قلبي ، أتيقن أن ذلك لا بد أن يحدث ... تلك النظرة التي تخترق المرأة وتجعلها تزحف على ركبتيها لاهثة ، ملتاعة . كنت أخدع نفسي أحياناً وأقول لقد زوجته امرأة بيضاء وسمينة . ولكن لا يكتفي أبداً .. كانت زوجة الشيخ عروسة عندما اكتشفت أنها تقابله في الكهف ، وكانت تبكي أمامي وتقول 'ليس ذلك بيدي .. إن ناراً تشتعل في جسدي تجعلني لا أملك من أمري شيئاً' .. وأخريات ، وأخريات .. وأنا أعلم أنهم يوماً ما سيضطادونه كالأرنب.”

(“It was inevitable that he would do that; if it hadn't been you it would have been another. I knew that it was inevitable that he would do that...ever since he was a child I knew that. I would see his eyes with their gaze that pierced like a drill, and my heart stopped and I would know that it was inevitable that this happen...that gaze that penetrates a woman and makes her crawl on her knees, panting and mad with lust. I used to deceive myself sometimes and say that I married him to a fair, plump woman. But he was never satisfied...the sheikh's wife was newly-married when I discovered that she was meeting him in the cave, and she cried in front of me and said, 'It was out of my hands...a fire ignited in my body that made me unable to control my state at all...' And others, and others...and I knew that one day they would hunt him like a rabbit.”) (25).

Through this description, the mother reinforces the expected womanizing image of her son that she believes the world sees. Sa' id is portrayed as a masculine seducer whose social caché is measured by his effect on women who cannot resist him. The most

interesting part of the mother's description is that she foresees the adverse reaction other men would have, as he slept with their wives or sisters, claiming that they would "hunt him down like a rabbit" (25) and foreshadows the events of the story. From his mother's point of view, Sa' id has an unintended effect on women, one which she saw from his childhood, in which his allure to women also grants him control over them. The mother even blames herself as complicit, highlighting that her idea of marrying him to the most desirable type of woman, a fair and plump one, would cause him to stay faithful. Clearly this preemptive marriage did not have its intended effect as Sa' id has had at least one other affair in addition to Zeina, with the sheikh's new wife.

Zeina describes him a similar way, speaking of "colliding with his gaze that undressed me" (ليل نهار كنت أصطدم بنظراته التي كانت تعريني) (20). This description relies upon the fetishizing of the visibility of women, again touching on their role as visible or invisible. Sa' id here performs masculinity through undressing her with his gaze, as the male is allowed to glance at whomever he wants, while the female is required to avert her gaze. Zeina also explains that he pursued her over and over for an extended period of time (20). While her recollections obviously contrasts with the mother's image of him as innocent in his affairs, as a kind of victim of genetics, both descriptions align him with an empowered masculine figure whose mere gaze commands acquiescence.

In both women's accounts, the image portrayed of Sa' id is one of excessive masculinity, masculinity that subordinates women instantly and even remotely. Additionally, he is the cause for the discussion of the *al-bish'a* ritual in the first place, and as the ritual is

reserved only for men, as representatives of honour for their families. Even as the object of punishment his masculinity is further emphasized. Thus, Sa' id is presented as a masculine figure, clearly aligned with the cultural image of masculinity in the gender binary.

However, when Sa' id is physically present in the story, his gender performance falls outside of that which is culturally considered masculine. While he is not present he appears as a masculine figure and reinforces the binary category of male. However, when he is present, his gender performance seems to contradict the image that is presented of him, or the image that others receive of his performance. For example, when she confronts her son, telling him that he should run away because the ritual will be performed, he begins crying. The mother says to him, “أتبكي؟ كان أبوك فاجراً ولكنه لم يبك” ... قط” (Are you crying? Your father was a lecher, but he never cried...) (18). Later in the same conversation, his crying becomes more pronounced, “بدا كحشرة كبيرة مقلوبة على ظهرها وهو ينتحب بحرارة” (He was like a big insect, flipped on its back as he wept passionately) (19). This image, of a bug lying on their back, weeping, is not by many means masculine with regard to the cultural gender binary. Sa' id's performance in these moments is more associated with the feminine, with women who in the story are described as unable to control themselves. They cannot control their need to gossip and talk, as such they cannot control their emotions and reactions. Here, Sa' id's gender performance more closely aligns with the views of the feminine. This association between yelling and femininity can also be seen in the scene prior to this one, in which

women are yelling and crying out to shut up a dog who continues to bark, while at the same time expressing their distress at the events transpiring within the community (21-23). Thus, in his fit of emotion, lying on his back and crying, Sa' id is performing in a culturally feminine manner, which is to say in a manner that is no longer masculine. Like the mother, he is performing at several points along the continuum rather than remaining where society places him.

In the same conversation, another moment arises when Sa' id again involuntarily presents himself as feminine in his performance. The mother encourages him to run away with Zeina, to leave before the ritual can be performed and he states that Zeina has already refused this option. The mother cannot believe this statement and asks him, "And you listen to her refusal?" to which Sa' id responds, "She didn't at first, but then the crippled one said he would kill himself if she left" (18). In this conversation, the mother's reaction again reflects how Sa' id's gender performance has changed. Goffman notes that performance is not only the way in which individuals exist in society, as their presence also depends upon how those performed selves are received by others. This exchange, along with the scene in which he weeps, shows the importance of reception with regards to gender performance. Sa' id is performing his gender in a not traditionally masculine way, and the mother locates it explicitly as feminine since within the cultural gender binary, there are only two options. If something is not masculine, it becomes feminine. Thus, the crying, which the mother opposes with his surly, emotionless father, is identified as feminine. Similarly, when he asks Zeina to leave with him, rather than

telling her to do so, he simply gives the woman complete control, over her actions and his. He does not force her and instead listens to her refusal and defers to her. Given the ways in which power is inherently masculine within the culture, he here not only transfers power to Zeina he switches genders with her.

While Sa' id himself does not appear again after these scenes, the mother finds Zeina and sends her up to her son in order to calm him down. While they are together, she keeps watch downstairs to ensure no one finds them. When they are finished, Zeina returns downstairs, and the mother asks about her son, to which Zeina responds, “إنه ملقى ، هناك ، غارق في عرقه لا يكف عن الارتعاش” (He has collapsed there, covered in sweat, and doesn't stop trembling) (23). The mother asks if her son is afraid, to which Zeina replies, “يقول إنه ليس خائفاً ، ولكنه ينضح بالعرق حتى كأنه خارج من بركة ماء ولا يكف عن الارتعاش” (He says that he isn't afraid, but he is wet with sweat like someone just climbing out of a pool of water and he won't stop trembling) (23). Similar to the moments described above, Sa' id here performs in a manner which diverges from the expected masculine posture of being in control. He is trembling, unable to calm down. There is even a suggestion that he has been unable to begin or complete a sexual act. He is clearly distraught and trembling, but first sentence out of the mother's mouth when Zeina comes down goes further when she irreverently comments that Zeina's visit with her son was “quick” (سريعاً) (23). His performance of masculinity is a failure in every way: his decisions are being made for him by two women, and he is lying helpless in bed, afraid. This image, of him trembling and helpless in bed mirrors that of his mother in bed after her husband beats her and rapes

her on her wedding night. They are both placed in a situation that they did not chose, and that they are being forced to deal with and react two. It is the helplessness that is described in these images that links them with one another. They are both completely overcome by the situation, and so defeated, physically and emotionally, that they cannot leave the bed. The mother is aware of what it is like to be in the situation, and thus she attempts to shield her son from it through her conversations with Zeina. While neither the rape nor the physical beating happened to Sa' id, they both lie helpless in bed as others control them, they are also in their positions subject to the reception of others, the mother through the reaction of the people who rejoice in her husband's treatment, and Sa'id in the way the mother and Zeina react to his performance, and reject it. The helplessness that they perform allows them to become the subjects of other people's desires, the mother to her husband's whim and Sa'id to the mother and eventually Zeina's desire to leave. The mirroring of that image associates his gender performance with femininity in the binary, with a lack of control and agency which are inherent to the performance of masculinity.

This scene which Zeina describes, that of Sa' id on the bed, drenched in his own sweat, shows an interesting relationship to the ritual. The ritual exists as an act which will, no matter the outcome, provide the family with a restoration of honour: if the man is not burned, he is proved innocent, and honour is restored, and if he is guilty, the fact that he is maimed by the ritual restores his honour. However, it is understood that an innocent man will not be burned because his mouth will be wet with saliva, protecting his tongue

from the stone, and proving he is telling the truth. Innocence is then tied to the presence of a bodily fluid. As Sa' id lies in his bed, trembling and soaked in his own sweat, bodily fluid represents the opposite of innocence: Sa' id is producing bodily fluid because he is guilty, not innocent, it is an indication of his guilt, a reaction to it. This image allows a parallel to be drawn between the ritual, and the events of the story, with Sa' id laying there, sweating, as the culminating moment, the equivalent of the accused licking the stone, the moment in which innocence or guilt is decided.

The mother throughout the story, and Sa' id on occasion, persistently disrupt the ways in which gender is performed, demonstrating at every juncture that it functions not within a binary, but along a continuum. However, there is a stark difference between their innovation and mobility and whether these performances might be accepted by the people surrounding both characters. In ways that conform to Goffman's account, there is an emphasis on the way that those around a person receive that identity performance. For the performance for all intents and purposes to work, it must be believable, that is to say it must be accepted by others in the way it was intended by the performer. A tracking of the reception by those surrounding each of the characters makes clear that the mother's numerous performances are widely accepted, while those of her son are not. There is no outwardly negative reaction to the mother's performance- it is accepted in all situations, even when she does not get her way. However, Sa' id's performances illicit anger from those around him, specifically his mother, who reprimands him for his feminine performances.

The mother transcends her assigned gender and performs at many different places along the continuum, refusing to remain within her culturally assigned gender, and she does so consciously. In this mobility she is able to gain control in situations where she would otherwise have none. Her exercise of power is all the more striking since she does not at any point claim to have the power of men, or control over them. In each instance she is granted this power only because she performs in ways which allow her to do so. Those around her, the men from the other family, Sa' id, Zeina and even Wardah, all accept her performance, allowing her to exist in spaces where she should not, such as the familial discussions, or control their actions, such as convincing Zeina to leave with Sa' id. Performance is as much reception as it is actual action, and thus through the positive reception of the mother's performance, which is underlined by the fact that she ultimately convinced Zeina to go with Sa' id, demonstrates the way her performance was successful.

The same cannot be said for Sa' id, whose transgender performances throughout the story are interpreted by the mother and Zeina as weakness. While his performance is rooted in strong emotions, and quite possibly less controlled than that of his mother, like all identity performances its success is ultimately at the mercy of those around him. The son is then subject to involuntary performances, which are based in emotions he is clearly not controlling, as can be seen by his crying. Unlike his mother, the reception of his performances denies him the freedom to be able to perform at different places in the continuum. Instead, he is questioned and undermined, and his non-masculine gendered

performances are taken as weakness. Masculinity is still binary, and Sa' īd may never escape the binary, unlike his mother. He fails ever to perform truly outside of masculinities and failed masculinities. This performance allows those around him, even women like his mother and Zeina, to assert control over him.

“Al-Bish‘ah” demonstrates that women have greater ability to perform acts in different points on the gender continuum, while men are restricted in order to maintain their power. I base this conclusion on the performance of the mother, who is able to move seamlessly from one performance to another. Since men culturally hold power and control, any deviation from that performative expectation entails the possibility of losing that control. Parallel to such a fixed and clear assignation of power along gender lines, however, in the story is the perhaps more efficacious ability to navigate the continuum, a mobility that men do not have. Thus, the story shows that while men inhabit a given position of power, which they must accurately perform to keep, it is the nominally disempowered woman who may be able to perform in ways that are both masculine and feminine, allowing herself to claim an unexpected degree of power given her position. The success of the culturally disempowered woman’s performance, nevertheless relies upon her strategic self-awareness, upon her opportunistic navigation of a binary system within which performing at different places along the continuum while never mistaking those locations as a home for an actual or essential self.

The subtlety of the story, the manner in which the author displays the way that women can navigate the gender continuum, is rather compelling when paired with

Halasa's history of living in numerous countries. The nuanced way in which he shows women's trans-gender performance ability comes to light when assessing the story in depth. On a surface level, as can be demonstrated through the way the book is taught to advanced-level Arabic language students (Cobham and Hafez 63-64), the story discusses honour and traditional Bedouin society. This surface level interpretation allows Halasa to spread his message about women while still having the story published and read. By placing his image of women as having a type of power between the lines, he gives himself a platform with which to make his ideas known while still adhering to cultural norms of representation of gender.

This conclusion returns to the importance of place within the story. While the title could place it in Jordan, the lack of dialect or specific place markers creates a universal story, demonstrating the way that the author wants to represent women in the Arab societies he has experienced. Given Halasa's experiences in numerous Arab countries, and the time of the composition of the story, during a year when he briefly returned to Jordan before settling in Egypt, perhaps he intended for a story that could exist anywhere, that could be read without a place and be identified with everywhere he has experienced. This fact is highlighted by the Marxism and the Arab Nationalism that was spreading at the time, which allowed him inspiration to write a story that would be assessable and place-able in any place within the Arab world, not only Jordan or Egypt.

From this thought emerges the idea that "Al-Bish'a" demonstrated Halasa's universal thoughts about the role of women, in a way which would not be outwardly

obvious to those not intended to delve into the story further. On the surface, the story can be read simply as a question of honour and tradition, however the in-depth analysis shows a deeper representation of gender performance, one for which Halasa did not intend to provide a place, but rather exemplify as a symbol of a fact he thought of as universal.

The portrayal of gender performance additionally creates an interesting connection between the events of the story, and the *al-bish'ah* ritual itself. The mother's gender performance allows her to act as a truth-seeker, one whose role in the story mirrors that of the stone within the ritual. The ritual itself exists in a binary, similar to the way culture perceives gender – there are only two options, to be burned, or not to be burned, and the only suspense is linked to the infliction of pain. No matter the outcome of the ritual, honour is restored to the family- the ritual then is meant to discover the truth, just as the mother does within the story. Halasa then, is critiquing the binary through the use of the story as a representative of the process of the ritual.

The mother spends the story looking for the truth, and aiming to save her son from pain. The story ends without specifics as to whether Zeina and Sa' id left together, or whether or not the ritual was performed, however the mother does find the truth regarding the affair. The goal for the mother, however, is not a restoration of honour, it is to save her son from pain, which she knows he will experience as she discovers his guilt. However, in the moment of discovery, she passes on the role of stone to Zeina, instead acting as the officiant: she sends Zeina to the room, the way the officiant would force the

accused to lick the stone. It is then Zeina, used as a literal tool, as the stone is in the ritual, who informs of innocence or guilt. Sa' id's sweating, as described by Zeina, shows guilt. He is consumed by his guilt, and unlike the ritual, the excretion of bodily fluid, here sweat, implies guilt. The mother, despite this, does not seek a restoration of honour, he is neither exonerated nor forgiven through the ritual of the mother, he is instead saved from pain. Her ritual provides him with an escape from pain, one which is facilitated by the mother through Zeina.

The story "Al-Bish'ah" is told from the point of view of the stone, of the mother, who aims to find a truth which will free her son from the pain of the ritual. Thus, Halasa zooms in on the process of the ritual, magnifying what would be mere seconds in the performance of *al-bish'ah* into a story that spans hours. Within the story, he demonstrates the way gender performance does not exist in a binary, and the way that the ritual should not. Through the representation of gender identity as fluid, as a continuum, he destabilizes the ritual, he destabilizes the identities that are inherent and engrained in the culture without destabilizing the society itself. This representation critiques the ritual, and its effectiveness, by critiquing society's obsession with honour and the binary it brings: innocence or guilt, masculine or feminine. And so, through this portrayal of the ritual as process, performed through the trans-gender acts of the mother, Halasa deconstructs the binary cultural system on two levels, through his representation of gender and justice.

The critique's power culminates in the lack of an ending, Halasa leaves the story in uncertain terms. There is no indication of what happens, only that the mother has done

what she can, and that Zeina has agreed to leave with Sa' id. The open end perhaps also plays into the critique of the binary: Halasa refused to choose one of the two outcomes to ending the story.

This open ended nature of the ending lends comparisons to the author's life. At the time of the story's writing, Halasa did not know whether or not he would be able to return to Jordan. The laws dictating return themselves existed in a binary, there were two options, communist or not, and the proof for being one was as simple as owning a work by Marx. This Jordanian law was in place for most of Halasa's life, only to be altered in the years before his death. While the story was published before the possibility came that Halasa could return, he never did. He found himself unwilling to compromise his views in order to return, and he was not allowed to return until after his death. The lack of a tidy ending to the fate of Sa' id links to the lack of closure Halasa experienced when grappling with the return to his home country of Jordan. Thus, the story demonstrates the feeling of uncertainty he experiences throughout his life with regards to his own place. This uncertainty was brought on by traditions and a society which reveled in binaries, which he deconstructs within the story. Halasa then, through the story, deconstructs the system which forced him to travel from place to place, leaving behind his home, and leaving him with uncertainty of return, and of justice, which remained even to his death.

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