

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AS A POWER STRATEGY IN RĀ'ĪḤAT AL-QIRFAH BY SAMAR YAZBIK

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This article discusses the connection between power and sexual activity as seen in the novel Rā'īḥat al-qirfah (The Scent of Cinnamon) by the Syrian author Samar Yazbik. It addresses how the fictional society constructed in the novel sees sexual prowess as an instrument of power and how the author uses this connection to analyse and critique the power structures found in Syrian society. This is done through all the characters but in particular through the development of 'Alyā, who transgresses gender norms and adopts what is coded male sexual behaviour in an attempt to obtain power. The article argues that her actions at the same time validate and violate the gender order since not only do they show that male sexual performance is linked to power, but also that a female can perform the same actions. Alyā's conduct further illustrates the mechanisms of power structures built on fear and violence as found in the novel.

The Syrian journalist and author Samar Yazbik (b. 1970) is perhaps most known in the West for her stand against the Syrian regime and her courageous reportage books and narratives from the Syrian civil war. Among these reportages are *Taqāṭu' nīrān: min yawmiyyāt al-intifāḍah al-sūriyyah* (Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution, 2012) for which she won both the Swedish PEN Tucholsky Award and the British PEN Pinter Award, and *Tis'a 'aṣrata imra'at^{an}: Sūriyyāt yarwīna* (Nineteen Women: Syrian Women Tell [their stories], 2018). Yazbik is also a skilled and daring writer of fiction who has published novels and short stories as well as written scripts for TV dramas. A common theme for all her work, fiction and non-fiction, is the questioning of social structures and the investigation into what upholds and supports these structures, in addition to ways of breaking free from them – if that is possible. Her main characters are often found at the outskirts of society for different reasons, and the themes she has dealt with range from poverty and prostitution to the life of prisoners. Although not outspokenly political, all her novels present a critique of systems and structures that force people to lead their lives as victims of circumstances they cannot change. The novel discussed in this article is no different.

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Rā'ihat al-qirfah (The Scent of Cinnamon)¹ is Yazbik's third novel and was published in 2008. It is set in modern-day Damascus and tells the story of 'Alyā and Ḥanān. Ḥanān is a wealthy lady married to her elder cousin Anwar, whereas 'Alyā is her maid from the poor neighbourhood of al-Raml. When the latter was about ten years old, Ḥanān hired, or rather bought, her from her father. The relationship between the two women soon turns into a sexual liaison where at first it seems that Ḥanān takes advantage of her servant, but gradually 'Alyā appears to be the one in charge. The narrative relates events in 'Alyā's and Ḥanān's respective lives through flashbacks.

These flashbacks provide information about a harsh society with characters constantly negotiating their positions vis-à-vis one another. The main interactions described between the characters are through physical violence or sexual activities, both forced and consented to. For most of the characters, the main aim is to navigate within the social norms of their fictional society and to retain their positions. 'Alyā, on the other hand, has different goals. She uses the strategies she learnt in her childhood, mainly sexual aggressiveness, as a way of exerting power and obtaining what she wants in life.

Discourses of Power

In a scene in *Rā'ihat al-qirfah* a desperate mother tries to help her daughter change her marriage from failure to success. She says: «Silly girl, it is from below, here is where the horse is tied»² (Yazbik 2008: 49), alluding to the sexual organs. She seems to suggest that by being in control of the couple's sexual encounters, her daughter will have power over the relationship. In the framework of the novel this is not a separate incident; on the contrary, the connection between sex and power permeates all relations in *Rā'ihat al-qirfah*. This article will demonstrate how Yazbik, through the novel's characters, investigates the concept of power and its function in Syrian society. By making the sexual act her metaphor for power, Yazbik locates her analysis in everyday life, to situations most grown-ups can relate to in one way or another. At the same time, the results of the investigation are applicable on all power dynamics – between men and women, between classes and between the state and its citizens. In this reading of the novel, sexual acts will be interpreted both as signifiers of the changing power relations within the fictional society

¹ The novel was translated into English as *Cinnamon* by Emily Danby in 2012 for Haus Pub, London. In this article all page numbers refer to the Arabic version of the novel and all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² «Marbat al-faras» literally means “Where the horse is tied” and is an Arabic saying referring to the essence of an issue or the most important place. The novel's use of the proverb carries a double meaning since the mother both explains to her daughter that lack of sex is the essence of her marital problems and that she should lead her husband in his penis.

and as instruments of change, adopting Michel Foucault's notion that sexuality is the power element endowed with the greatest instrumentality, and able to support the most varied strategies (1990: 103). His definition of "power" as actions performed with a clear set of aims and objectives (Foucault 1990: 95) used to influence situations to serve one's own purposes will furthermore be the definition used in this article. However, Foucault's theories of power and power relations have been critiqued for their emphasis on the subject as a passive agent and their vagueness when it comes to the agency of social actors to construct themselves as subjects (Haugaard 2022). Mark Haugaard further points at Foucault's notion that power can only be exercised over free subjects as a weak part in his theories (2022: 348). Both the lack of agency and the relation between freedom and power have been seen as problematic when using Foucault's texts in feminist and postcolonial discourses (Hartsock 1989) where freedom of choice is non-existent, but resistance to the dominator shows the subject's agency. However, Kurt Borg (2015) argues that an interest in subject formation can be traced in all of Foucault's authorship. He shows that the productivity of the power/knowledge matrix applies to the creation of individual subjects as well as objects and fields of knowledge (Borg 2015: 4). Haugaard (2022: 349) pro *Rā'ihat al-qirfah* poses an elaboration of the section of Foucault's theories which focuses on the power of agency and notes that Foucault has overlooked the role of internalization of structural constraints and enabling aspects of power. In my discussion of the novel, I will make use of both Haugaard's and Borg's retheorizations, especially in the discussion of the character 'Alyā. Nancy Hartsock further notes that Foucault's texts do not recognize the transformative force of unmasking power (1989: 165) and suggests that a theory of power relevant in modern society must acknowledge the difficulty of creating alternative power structures (1989: 172). In the analysis of the novel this aspect will be elaborated on in relation to the characters' decisions to find ways out of the rules society has set for them. However, as Borg (2015: 13) points out, Foucault accounts in his texts for "states of domination" «where power relations are fixed as asymmetrical, greatly limiting the margin of freedom». The fictional society of *Rā'ihat al-qirfah*, modelled on contemporary Syria, can be said to be such as state, thus limiting the agency of the subjects, whether dominating or domineered.

A State of Domination

Nancy Hartsock notes that «[p]ower is associated firmly with the male and masculinity» (1989: 157). This seems to be the belief of the Syrian regime which, according to Rahaf Aldoughli, is built on a masculinist platform (2019b) manifested in songs and popular media (2019a). She has furthermore shown that this discourse emerged in early nationalist narratives in

Syria and forms an essential component in constructing a masculine state identity in the national imagining (2017). The state, and thus the ultimate form of power in the country, is grounded in a link between a strong masculinity performance and the ability to dominate others. As suggested by Samira Aghacy, a dictator always equals a form of patriarch in a state that reiterates patriarchal values by forming national subjects that are inferior and dependent on the state (2009: 96). The state has furthermore used literature to introduce political and ideological ideas throughout their time in power, and the relationship between masculinity and power has been central to the production and reinforcement of an aesthetic ideology in Syria (Weiss 2022). Masculinity construction has further been used in Syrian women's writing as a way to discuss and debate forms of power (Berg 2021), perhaps because of the state's interest in, and portrayal of, itself, as a masculine, patriarchal authority. It is however not only the masculinist values that are of interest in a comparison between the state and the novel in question here, but also the use of force and violence. As shown by Salwa Ismail (2018), the Syrian state rests on the apparatuses of violence, and she sees the use of political violence as a modality to structure the relations between the regime and its citizens (2018: 2). A similar observation is made by Aghacy who argues that the relation between the state and its subjects echoes that of the relation between men and women in a patriarchal society (2009: 95). The connection between masculinity, violence and power can thus be seen as overt in Syria and it is therefore not strange that the fictional society in the novel is governed by a patriarchal gender order that favour males over females.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states, «in a society where men and women differ in their access to power, there will be important gender differences, as well, in the structure and constitution of sexuality» (1985: 2). To use the sexual act and sexual relations to critique society, as Yazbik does in her novel, is therefore not strange, nor is she the only Syrian writer who has done this. As Alessandro Columbu has shown in his work on Zakariyyā Tāmīr (2023), questions of gender and the transgression of expected gender roles function as ways to highlight social problems that otherwise would be unexplored. In a longer study (2016) focused on the body as a symbol in Syrian women's writing, Martina Censi analyses six novels in depth, among them *Rā'ihat al-qirfah* by Yazbik. In her book, Censi shows how Syrian women writers use descriptions of sexual relations to discuss societal issues (2016: 84). She moreover demonstrates how Yazbik in particular focuses on aspects of domination and violence in her narration (2016: 102). This is consistent with the type of power that appears in the novel as well. Whereas power can be used as a force to realize joint projects, teach, or democratically govern (Haugaard 2022: 351), the form that the characters in *Rā'ihat al-qirfah* are concerned with is power to dominate others, which is called "coercion" and is seen by Haugaard as the crudest kind of power, one that is

built on threats and only used in case of failure of authority (2022). I argue that it is symptomatic that this is the form of power the characters work towards since they live in a state of domination where this is the most recognizable one. As shown by Ismail, violence is the modality used by the Syrian regime to create the subjects' understanding of the terms of rule (2018: 194) and the sexual relations in the novel capture that in all its ugliness.

Sexual Domination as a Form of Power

In *Rā'iḥat al-qirfah*, the sexual act is used as a signifier for the power that male characters have and need to keep. 'Alyā's father exercises this power as often as possible. While the children, put to bed in the same room, listen and learn, the father uses sex as a way of showing his wife who really decides. If she dares to complain because of tiredness or backache, he increases the number of times he wants to have sex per day. In the end, 'Alyā's mother sees no other choice than to give in and although «[m]ost of the time she was crying, with time she got used to it and began moving without him demanding of her to do so» (Yazbik 2008: 53). By not just passively accepting the marital rape, but actively responding to her husband's demands, the mother sanctions the sexual act as a way of subordination and participates in the power game as an "active subject", one of the conditions Foucault places on a power relationship (2000: 340).

'Alyā's family is not the only family where this pattern can be found, and 'Alyā and her siblings hear through the corrugated iron walls what happens in the neighbouring houses. The children of the alleyway absorb the sexual behaviour of their parents, and the boys see it as their privilege to touch the girls' private parts as they feel like. They use this "privilege" as a way of asserting power over them by gesturing at the place between the girls' thighs to allude to what might happen if the latter do not behave (Yazbik 2008: 35). Sexual activity and power thus function in a relational way in the novel for both children and grown-ups. A corollary to this equation is that sexual activity can be used to obtain or retain positions of power. Alyā's father sees himself entitled to sex with his wife whenever he feels like it. Ḥanān, in her upper-class home, is taught the same thing and her husband similarly uses sex as a way of dominating his wife. In both the households described in the novel, the very rich and the very poor, the idea that a man has the right to sleep with his wife whenever and however he wishes is seen as unquestionable by the female characters. 'Alyā's father tells his wife that only women who fulfil their husbands' wishes will go to heaven (Yazbik 2008: 54). The wishes he refers to is his right to have sex with her at any time. Ḥanān's mother does not turn to religion for support, but rather to social convention and etiquette, when she instructs her daughter to please her husband in any way he wants (Yazbik 2008: 55). The female characters have very few op-

tions but to obey, given that the argument is based on interpretations of social norms as well as religion.

The women do not dare to object and the men, though clearly aware that their wives are not enjoying the situation, persist in their sexual activities. As Censi notes in her discussion of the novel, the weak characters are subordinated to the strong (2016: 89); however, who is seen as weak and strong can differ and, for the men, to stop or to abstain from sex would mean a change in the power structure within the relationship. Allowing for the woman's needs would result in, for these male characters, a decrease in physical and mental power.

Sexual Prowess as a Signifier of Power

In general, Yazbik's work does not shy away from descriptions of intimate and sexual relations; however, what stands out in this novel is that almost all the sexual actions are void of mutual pleasure and performed with the sole aim of obtaining or consolidating positions of power. The many scenes of sexual interaction do not add anything to the plot except as read like transactions of power between the characters. Nonetheless, a reading of sexuality as a signifier for power highlights the complexity of the fictional society constructed and the way in which the patriarchal system, as Yazbik states, forces its members to become both victims and perpetrators at the same time³. This fluctuation of positions is mirrored in the narrative structure of *Rā'ihat al-qirfah*. Through an unchronological way of presenting pieces of information, Yazbik creates characters who change from offenders to victims and back again through the course of the novel. However, power does not exist in a vacuum; it is, in Foucault's terms, dependent on «a multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate» (1990: 92). In *Rā'ihat al-qirfah*, class, gender, and social norms can be seen as force relations setting the scene for the power game. Here, the social and religious structures of society that Haugaard named structural aspects of domination are of importance (2022: 349). By dictating what is generally considered powerful, the force relations function as borders within which the characters move. That gender is one of the force relations distributing power has been discussed through the connection between male characters and sexual activity above. What the characters and the fictional society effectively are doing is to create a «[m]asculinity [which] is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men), and in relation to a general symbolism of difference (the opposition of femininity and masculinity)» (Connell 2005: 223). By coding sexual prowess as a male action, sexual ability is made part of hegemonic masculinity, «the currently accepted strategy of guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women»

³ Conversation with the author, Gothenburg Book Fair, 2013.

(Connell 2005: 77), as it appears in the novel. However, as pointed out by Censi (2016: 90), the male characters appear somewhat stereotypical in the novel in the sense that none of them shows any understanding for the female characters or a wish to change the patriarchal power structures that permeate their fictional society.

Growing into Gender Roles

It is clear, in *Rā'ihat al-qirfah*, that a girl is not meant to be faster than a boy. When 'Alyā proves that she is just that, the “symbolic difference” between male and female is erased, and the boys are at a loss. The notion of masculinity as something which needs to be protected and performed to perfection is ingrained in the children in the novel from a young age. Being aware that masculinity is a sensitive subject, 'Alyā insults the boys in the alley by escaping from them, whilst screaming: «Only a man, son of a man, will catch me» (Yazbik 2008: 35). The boys do not need more than this sentence from 'Alyā to feel the need to attack her and prove that they indeed are real men. Their position of having their masculinity repeatedly questioned agrees with Håkan Lindgren's definition of patriarchy as being «not a system where the male is superior – but a system where the male is completely worthless except when he asserts his power through threats and violence» (2013: 22). The boys cannot just sit down and laugh at 'Alyā, enjoying their “masculine superiority”, but need to demonstrate actively that she is wrong. As Connell has pointed out, masculinity is a social construction dependent on others', men's and women's, perception of it (2005: 72, 82). The fact that 'Alyā does not see and treat the boys as men means that they are not, at least not until they have proven her wrong. Connell's discussion of masculinity is consistent with Foucault's perception of power as being relational to others (1990: 95) and Haugaard's expansion on this as power being the consequence of social interaction (2022). By refusing to treat the boys as superior, 'Alyā negates their power over her. This comes with a cost, as will be seen, but it shakes the power relations while the struggle is ongoing.

Having grown up in the alleyway, 'Alyā knows the soft spots of the boys chasing after her, and how she can get at them. Even when the boys start feeling tired and it is getting dark, «[t]urning back was not an option because 'Alyā turned towards them now and then pointing with her finger towards their bottoms» (Yazbik 2008: 36). With this obscene gesture, she makes use of the boys' fear of deviating from the hegemonic norm which governs the alleyway. She and they know that in the power grid they are navigating within, being on the receiving end, whether it is about sexual relations or other interactions, is to be on the weaker end (Dunne 1998: 9). 'Alyā's gesture becomes a double insult, when she as a girl employs a sign usually used by the boys. By doing this, she implies both that they are not superior and

that they are/will be dominated by her. The boys are not prepared to let a young girl outdo them, neither are they prepared to accept her insults. They race after her to «save face [...] and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety» (Peteet 2002: 321). To bring the situation back to normal they must catch up with ‘Alyā and overpower her. However, when they finally do, she is the one who attacks them (Yazbik 2008: 37). When the boys’ mothers see this violation of the gender order, they help their sons to free themselves from the little girl, and then report back to ‘Alyā’s father. It is not the fighting that is the problem for the parents – the boys are involved in fights every day in the alleys of al-Raml – but the fact that they were beaten by a girl. Instead of accepting ‘Alyā’s strength, the mothers strive to uphold the gender norms. ‘Alyā’s father recognizes the power of his daughter, but rather than being happy with her for standing up for herself and fighting off her attackers, he punishes her more harshly than usual (Yazbik 2008: 37). As discussed by Haugaard (2022: 344), social structures are attributable to the actions of individuals and in a system where male power is built on female weakness, the father cannot allow for his daughter to rebel against the system. Even though she is a single individual, and the social structures are greater than individual acts, her behaviour might inspire others, something that would change society in a longer perspective.

Another social structure that the father is afraid will change, is the idea of what hegemonic masculinity entails. He knows that both gender and social norms place certain expectations on him as a male. In the novel, a respected masculinity performance embodies several aspects; among others, an ability to provide for one’s family, to protect oneself and one’s family, to not lose face and to perform sexually. The same, or similar, traits, have been singled out for discussion in works on literary masculinity in the Middle East (Aghacy 2009; Elsadda 2012; Berg 2021; Columbu 2023) and masculinity in the Middle East in general (Kahf; Sinno 2021; Inhorn 2012; Sinclair-Webb; Ghousoub 2000). Constraints, such as the demands placed on males mentioned above, are often accepted since they lead to power-to (Haugaard 2022: 354). A man who performs his masculinity well becomes powerful. The father in *Rā’ihāt al-qirfah* knows this; and he also knows that he cannot meet the expectations. To compensate for his shortcomings, he turns to coercion, materialized through sexual demands, to maintain his status.

Lost Power and Changing Relations

The father’s fear of losing his position within the family and in the wider society is not groundless; the power relations between characters in the novel are oscillating. Their sexual actions place them within a hierarchical power grid, where dominating the sexual act means dominating other aspects of the characters’ relations. In one way or another, all of them – from the children

on the street who make obscene gestures to each other, to the young males who force themselves on their female friends, to spouses who use sex as a battlefield – acknowledge the relation between sex and power. The characters show an awareness of this presence of power akin to Foucault's depiction of it as being «everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere» (1990: 93). In some cases, they find it more rewarding to be subjected to power in return for favours such as work or protection; in other cases, instead, it becomes more important for them to exercise power over others. Regardless of their choice, they take an active role in positioning themselves within the power grid created through sexual activities in the novel. This pragmatic view of power agrees with Foucault's definition of power as «produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another» (1990: 93). The instability in the power relations that exist between the characters are in line with Foucault's further explanation that power is «exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations» (1990: 94).

This is well illustrated in Ḥanān's relationship with her husband, Anwar. When he is in full power, she describes him as a crocodile (Yazbik 2008: 10, 80), under whose dead weight she is choking: «The crocodile who used to put his open palm over her lips, demand of her to shut up, ride her for a few minutes in silence, then rise to wash and return all curled up inside his shell, like a snail» (Yazbik 2008: 92).

By choosing a crocodile as the symbol for her sexually aroused husband, Ḥanān conveys the picture of a sly, ugly, and heavy predator with a hard shell, dangerous and powerful, but unattractive. After the act, he returns like a tiny slug. He is still slimy and unattractive, but the power is gone, and he curls up and hides inside his shell, closed off from the rest of the world and particularly from his wife. When Anwar later becomes impotent, Ḥanān begins to spend the night at her friend's house, she drinks alcohol and becomes involved with other women, actions that were unthinkable to her when her husband was still powerful. Anwar's loss of power is thus Ḥanān's gain, which can explain her strong reaction when she one day finds 'Alyā in bed with him. After the incident Ḥanān has a dream where she sees her husband's penis as a snake in 'Alyā's hands. A snake which slowly becomes bigger, then grows wings, at which point 'Alyā mounts and rides it high in the air while it strikes Ḥanān in the face with its wings (Yazbik 2008: 19). Ḥanān's fear of losing her freedom is one of the reasons for her strong reaction to the scene she witnesses: if 'Alyā manages to wake Anwar's sexual ability, Ḥanān will once again be subordinated to his power.

The characters carefully judge their own and others' actions to analyse shifts in the power balance. Guarding one's position means a constant evaluation of every action committed and every reaction it provokes. The shift in power balance is demonstrated in the boy 'Abbūd's rape of 'Alyā's sister.

Whereas the rape itself does not lead to any repercussions from the neighbours, he is, however, made fun of, since ‘Alyā manages to hurt him physically. She marks him with her knife when she tries to save her sister, and «[t]he neighbours kept on making fun of ‘Abbūd and remembering ‘Alyā running after him» (Yazbik 2008: 89). As May Abu Jaber points out: «[s]ociety does not only punish women who transgress the expected behaviour, also men who do not “assert their rights as ‘real’ men should” are at risk of punishment of various forms» (2010: 40). ‘Abbūd is not punished for the rape, which signifies that sexual aggressiveness is seen as sanctioned, thus giving him a certain status; whereas the fact of having been unable to defend himself shows that he is not a “real man”. ‘Abbūd, worried about ‘Alyā’s attacking him again and making him the laughingstock of the neighbourhood, stays away from the alley until he knows that she has moved to work for Ḥanān.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet discusses rape in patriarchal societies as a way of enhancing the patriarchal force and shaming the victim to silence (2000: 44). Had ‘Alyā not intervened, this would have worked for Abbūd. Another character who makes use of this dual outcome, empowerment for the rapist and shame for the victim, is Sāsūkī, the local gang leader, who sees it as a tactic for power enhancement. Sāsūkī is the king of the neighbourhood (Yazbik 2008: 110), the leader of most of the children and the one who provides them with work. When ‘Alyā drops out of school at the age of ten, she too goes to Sāsūkī for work. Her reputation of being strong and able to fight attracts Sāsūkī’s attention and he gives her a job. At the beginning he ignores her, but the other children keep repeating to him how difficult it will be for him to overpower ‘Alyā (Yazbik 2008: 110). After a while, he feels the need to assert his power over her, and to reinstate in the other gang members who the person with the real power is. To fight and have opinions is not for the girls, hence ‘Alyā has to be taught a lesson. The lesson Sāsūkī plans, and which seems to be his only way of re-asserting his power, is to sexually abuse ‘Alyā. It is not the first time Sāsūkī plays the rape game to gain or retain power (Yazbik 2008: 111). The rape, but also the threat of rape, becomes a tool to assert power not just over the girls in the group but over the boys as well; directly, as a way of showing strength and sexual bravado; indirectly, as a threat towards sisters, cousins, and potential sweethearts of the other boys.

In ‘Alyā’s case, Sāsūkī is at first successful, but what he does not count on is that, contrary to the other girls, ‘Alyā is not easily overpowered. The following day she awaits a chance to come close to Sāsūkī; when it comes, she attacks him and scars his face with her knife (Yazbik 2008: 112). By this attack ‘Alyā has regained her integrity and shown not only Sāsūkī, but his whole gang, that she is not weak and easily subordinated. Sāsūkī’s plan – which, judged from the other children’s reactions, normally is fail proof in granting him power and shaming his victims – does not work with ‘Alyā. The price for this action is constant fear for her life and ‘Alyā does not leave

her home again until her father brings her to work for Ḥanān. By not accepting to be subordinated by Sāsūkī's action, the girl has broken his immediate power over her. The social norms, and the other children's reactions, are too strong to allow her to use her new position to exert power over others; but she has shown that Sāsūkī will only be powerful if the other children support him and agree to his way of using rape as a tool to enhance his power.

The aggressive sexuality performed by 'Abbūd and Sāsūkī as young men, eager to show off their sexual ability and form a power base for themselves, is successful but is not the normative behaviour in al-Raml. The men, though not commenting on 'Abbūd's rape, do not support violent sexual performances. They are all in agreement that 'Alyā's father is «[u]nworthy of her [his wife], hearing her daily screams when he hits her for no reason at all and her nightly screams when he takes her violently» (Yazbik 2008: 61). But, despite knowing of, and having opinions on, the father's conduct, the men do not interfere with his ways of dealing with his wife and family. Any complaints they have will in the long run jeopardize their own situations, since it means that a man is not free to treat his wife as he wants. They are also worried that 'Alyā's father will use his good looks to seduce their wives, a power loss they cannot afford (Yazbik 2008: 60). At one point in the novel, 'Alyā's mother, who usually leaves the father to deal with the children as he sees fit, realizes that things are getting out of hand and goes out to the street to search for help. When the neighbours enter the house, the father whips out his penis and

[h]e pushed his thing at them and said:

- If any one comes close I will feed him – this.

They stared at him in disbelief, and left (Yazbik 2008: 65).

The men, who were set on helping the mother and her girls, all retreat and go home, despite 'Alyā's mother begging them to help her. No-one is willing to lose his own status by daring the father to go through with his threat and penetrate them.

Although the other men and the mother see the father's sexuality as uncontrollable and scary, it still is a power factor. The wife realizes that she must obey, or the father will take the little money she earns and spend it on prostitutes or take himself another wife (Yazbik 2008: 54). The sexual power of the father and the other male characters is both physical and psychological through the threats they utter and the ones they in fact go through with. The other men retreat when they hear the father's threat and allow him to do what he wants and thus admit the power of the aggressive sexuality the father exhibits.

Women's Use of Sex as a Tool for Power

The relation between powerful masculinity and sex is not recognized and upheld only by the men; the female characters know of, and use, it. Despite her aching back, disturbed sleep and never-ending pregnancies, 'Alyā's mother is aware of the status her husband's sexual appetite gives her as his wife. When the neighbouring women gossip approvingly about her husband and the huge size of his penis, she only comments «he never gets enough» in a tone that mingles complaint and pride (Yazbik 2008: 53). Her position amongst the women is affected by her husband's sexual ability. It is therefore not strange that the elder women in the novel, among them Ḥanān's mother, are very clear about the fact that a woman has to uphold the sexual interest of the man. A man's virility is a source of pride for him and for his wife.

At the same time, Ḥanān's mother makes clear that there is a difference between male and female sexuality. Thinking back of her childhood, «Ḥanān can remember her mother's talk about the blessing of her triangle and its malice, how it can become a rope to hang her or a rope to fetter a man» (Yazbik 2008: 120). For a man, as seen in 'Abbūd's case, it is unlikely that he makes a snare for himself by being sexually active, if he follows the heterosexual norm prevailing in the fictional society described. 'Abbūd's rape of 'Alyā's sister, though not a sanctioned act, served to strengthen his masculinity; conversely, the raped girl is so ashamed that shortly afterwards she commits suicide (Yazbik 2008: 89).

For the female characters, sexuality needs to be used carefully to lead to the goal of power and not to their death. The girls in 'Alyā's neighbourhood make calculations on what sexual activities they can participate in so as to be accepted without losing their reputation. Their goal is not direct domination but to "rule by proxy" through a man, preferably a husband. However, even this needs to be done with care in the gender regime of the fictional society. Ḥanān's mother has used her own advise, that is to use her "triangle", to fetter a man and then gained influence over him. This has led to her brother-in-law gossiping about her as "the trousers of the family", ruling over her husband in bed and otherwise (Yazbik 2008: 68). The gossip is proof that sex and power are related, and also that power should be in the hands of the man, according to the novel's characters.

The idea advocated by Ḥanān's mother, that "the triangle" can snare a man, is used by 'Alyā's older sister, though outside of marriage. Having realized that sex can engender power, she starts a dangerous game with her manager: «She used to let him take off his trousers and kiss her breasts, but she did not allow him near the dangerous area, the deep area in her, wherein she would bring shame on her family. She knows the feeling of being followed by danger, the fine line between refusing him and keeping her job» (Yazbik 2008: 64). The way 'Alyā's older sister and Ḥanān's mother think of, and

use, sex is not as a direct way of gaining and displaying power as it is in the case of the male characters. The sister offers herself to the boss “to be used” for his pleasure: her goal is not to enjoy a sexual encounter but to obtain favours from him. Her actions empower his masculinity and position, and the benefits she will get are through privileges granted by him. Ḥanān’s mother promotes the same idea. Neither of the women proposes to actively take power; they give what they have and hope to get something in return, instead. This further solidifies the norms and expectations placed on masculinity; i.e., by first enabling the man to be sexually active and then waiting for him to grant the woman favours. This fully demonstrates that the male is the giver and the female the receiver. The way the female characters use sex as a power tool can be seen as a variant of the patriarchal bargain described by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 1998). Rather than resisting the division of power based on the gender norms, the female characters support it. They strengthen the idea of the male’s right to sex, and acknowledge the power this behaviour grants men. By buying into the game, the female characters expect a certain outcome depending on their initial position. For both ‘Alyā’s mother, who has very limited agency, and for Ḥanān, the bargain is to keep their husbands and not be divorced, whereas for ‘Alyā’s older sister money, gifts and a better position at work are part of the arrangement.

The patriarchal bargain is a model based on women’s ways of dealing with power structures in heterosexual family relations. In *Rā’iḥat al-qirfah*, homosexuality plays an important role in the life of Ḥanān and her upper-class friends and similar “bargains” are made in this environment too⁴. The lesbian relations are seen by the participating women as a way of quietly dealing with the powerlessness they feel in their sexual relations with their husbands. Martina Censi further sees these relations as a manner for them to take refuge from the patriarchal society they live in and create a place without violence (2016: 88, 108). However, the relationships between the women are not void of the relation between dominant sexual behaviour and power that can be seen in the male-female relations.

Ḥanān’s first same sex experience is almost equivalent to rape, and the older girl who “plays” with her in the public baths then refuses to speak to her. Ḥanān is unable to talk about what has happened and the other girl’s coldness towards her makes her confused. Amongst the women, she later gets to know, the active and more experienced women choose their girl-

⁴ When the novel was first published, the homosexual relationships were fore fronted by critics. However, the novel is far from being the first Arab literary text to deal with same sex relationships between women (Al-Samman 2008; Amer 2008) and references to both hetero- and homosexual relations are relatively common in modern Arabic literature (Allen; Kilpatrick; de Moor [eds.] 1995; Accad 1990). For a discussion on the homosexual theme in the novel see El Hajj 2023 and Censi 2016.

friends and become the dominant partner, exercising power over their lovers inside and outside of bed. This happens to Ḥanān, and she becomes Nāzik's girlfriend. Their relation changes when 'Alyā comes to work as a maid and Ḥanān sees a chance to move from being dominated by Nāzik to dominating her maid. As for all the characters in the novel, Ḥanān is aware of the connection between power and sex, and believes that her position entitles her to use 'Alyā. Similar calculations are done by some of the other women, who simply see the same sex relations as a way of getting favours done for them in a "sex for power" exchange with ladies in higher positions (Yazbik 2008: 139).

The only sexual act described in the novel that is void of a power exchange is when Ḥanān pleasures herself, but even then she comments to herself: «There is not a man who is able to give you pleasure as supple fingers do... and with that you are your own mistress» (Yazbik 2008: 72), thus framing the activity as a power statement where the sexual pleasure seems subordinated to the happiness of not being subjugated to a man.

Adopting Male Sexual Behaviour as a Power Strategy

From her early childhood 'Alyā is painfully aware of two things. The first is that she must fight to get what she wants and the second is that the boys constantly seem to have the upper hand, just because they are male. She soon realizes that what is perceived of as masculine conduct – being fast, strong, and able to fight off attackers – are all things that she can do. As shown by Kurt Borg, subjection does not necessarily mean that a subject accepts his/her position; it can involve a development into subjects who perform a deliberate self-transformation (Borg 2015: 5). 'Alyā, for instance, soon realizes that, rather than fighting to just protect herself, she can be like the boys; more importantly, by emulating their behaviour, she can gain respect and expand her power base (Yazbik 2018: 36).

When 'Alyā begins her work in the big house, Ḥanān sees her as yet another maid, all the same type, all looking similar and all there to serve her. Soon after 'Alyā has started her work, Ḥanān begins to demand sexual favours of her, first in the bath, and later in bed. She uses her status and 'Alyā's submissiveness to force her maid to pleasure her. In Ḥanān's view, this is just part of their mistress-maid relationship. 'Alyā is at first happy to enjoy feeling important when she gives Ḥanān pleasure, to be admired and pampered and appreciated for her looks. Like her older sister did with her manager, she offers herself to be used and then waits for Ḥanān to give her treats, like long baths, as signs of gratitude. 'Alyā accepts the class and age hierarchy which places Ḥanān far above her and does what she is told. She uses sex in the way she has seen her mother and sister do, and as the women in al-Raml have taught her. But one day Ḥanān insults 'Alyā by screaming and shouting at her. 'Alyā has overslept, and stayed in her mistress's bed un-

til the morning, rather than go to her own room after having pleased Ḥanān. This incident makes ‘Alyā understand that her role has only been that of a toy with no real value attached to it. The little power she has gained by pleasuring Ḥanān only lasted as long as her mistress wanted it to. It is an imaginary power related to accepting oppression. She has allowed Ḥanān to do what she stopped the boys in al-Raml to do to her; to use her in exchange for her being accepted. By copying her sister and mother, and the other women in the novel, and approaching power from within the system as well as accepting the dominance and working around it, ‘Alyā has only created a provisional position for herself. The position she has is dependent on Ḥanān’s feeling and on power trickling down to her when Ḥanān is in a good mood. Having understood that this is not a successful way forward, ‘Alyā remembers the boys she used to tease and how she refused to view them as superior to her. She therefore decides that, instead of trying to win back her place as the favourite plaything of Ḥanān, she will fight back. In the same way as she did not let Sāsūkī silence her through rape, she will not be subordinated to Ḥanān.

‘Alyā is described as having inherited her father’s hard and determined glance (Yazbik 2008: 63). In fact, she inherited his very hardness and determinedness. ‘Alyā bides her time and thinks of the men and boys in al-Raml; and based on their behaviour, she makes her plans: «She remembers the stories [...] of women who have been broken down by men and how Sāsūkī broke her once and how ‘Abbūd repeatedly humiliated her sister. She suddenly discovered all the things that had passed [...] they will be her only way of drawing up her maps and gameplan» (Yazbik 2008: 150).

When she is invited back to Ḥanān’s bed, she does not present herself as the malleable toy, but as a forceful ruler; and Ḥanān quickly submits to her force (Yazbik 2008: 151). This latter, who has seen herself as the dominant partner due to her class background, her age, and the fact that she is ‘Alyā’s employer, is taken aback by the sudden change in her maid. Since she herself has been brought up in a similar, though less harsh, environment as ‘Alyā’s, she immediately recognizes the power generated by the aggressive sexuality her maid exhibits. Rather than throwing out her maid, Ḥanān accepts her loss of power and thus strengthens ‘Alyā’s position by accepting to be subjugated by her.

‘Alyā has used the power of sexual ability, through its connection to male conduct, as an instrument to obtain her own position of power. Though still the servant during daytime, she is no longer governed by Ḥanān’s orders, but does only the chores she likes. She is showered with expensive gifts and enjoys the knowledge that she is the one who can say yes or no to Ḥanān. Her childhood experiences have paid off and she has become the mistress of the house (Yazbik 2008: 129).

Having overpowered her mistress, ‘Alyā sets off to be the ruler of the whole house and takes on Anwar too. Anwar is old and impotent and at first not interested in ‘Alyā, and when she pursues her sexual quest, he becomes afraid (Yazbik 2008: 152). Like the other male characters in the novel, he is not used to strong female sexuality. ‘Alyā is helped by the fact that the force relations placing Anwar above her through gender, class, and social norms as her employer, are weakened since he is bedridden. He has lost all his own physical and social strength, which simplifies ‘Alyā’s task. At the beginning of her time in the house, the girl could never dream of giving order to her employer, despite his age and illness. It is only after she has realized how to use her sexual power that she dares to approach him and take control over him exactly as she has taken control over Ḥanān previously through sexual domination.

Once she has complete power in her hands, ‘Alyā marvels at how easy it was for her to access her “throne”, given that «it did not take much cleverness to reach her throne, once she had learnt the art of life and how to be the strongest in bed» (Yazbik 2008: 15). She divides her nights between Anwar and Ḥanān, and spends her days «dreaming of the nights which will transform her into a queen. She thinks of the details, the details of the night which she loves and waits for» (Yazbik 2008: 14). ‘Alyā makes repeated comments about the difference between night and day, and the magic of the darkness which has helped her to get power. On the one hand, the night-time and the darkness can be connected to the sexual act. In Ḥanān’s house, unlike in al-Raml, sex is a nocturnal activity, and it is through sex that ‘Alyā has gained her status, her throne, as she calls it. On the other hand, darkness, which blurs the normal daytime borders, might be what ‘Alyā needs to have the opportunity to perform her female masculinity. The darkness can be seen as an external factor changing, or removing, the force relations normally governing life in the novel. ‘Alyā’s previous attempts in al-Raml at gaining power, though successful on one level, made her an outcast on another level, for breaking the gender order. When growing up, ‘Alyā managed to break the boys’ authority over her, but never managed to gain substantive power herself. She was able to tease the boys chasing her, to harm ‘Abbūd’s reputation as a man, and to show Sāsūkī and his gang that she was not defeated by him, but her actions did not allow her to dominate others. In Ḥanān’s house she has not only regained her respect, but she is exerting power. The control she has gained can be measured in the long silence when Ḥanān and ‘Alyā lock eyes with each other over Anwar’s bed before Ḥanān, scared by her husband’s possible renewed powers, finally steps back into her role as the upper-class mistress and dismisses her maid, the young woman she has accepted as a dominating force in her household for a long period (Yazbik 2008: 10). When Ḥanān has calmed down and thought through the situation, she leaves the house in a rush looking for her maid to bring her back. Al-

though Ḥanān's initial reaction was to end 'Alyā's power over herself and her husband, her desire to bring the young woman back again proves that the power structures within the household have changed. 'Alyā's imitation of the masculine power play and Ḥanān's acceptance of it show that on a personal level change is possible: «She ['Alyā'] thinks that she will now be able to devour men and women with the same lust and force. She has learnt enough» (Yazbik 2008: 145).

Though not given a happy victorious ending, 'Alyā is not punished and demolished for her gender transgression. On the contrary, her adoption of the male sexual conduct she learnt in her childhood has granted her power and a position in Ḥanān's house. And though it is unclear whether Ḥanān finds her or not, she is welcome back to her position. Despite now and then looking back when leaving the house, 'Alyā herself moves steadily onwards with her knife close by in her bag and her mistress's high heeled shoes on her feet, exhibiting a mixture of normative male and female attributes. She does not, as in Halberstam's definition of female masculinity, choose to live like a man, or constantly perform masculinity (1998: 110). On the contrary, she happily behaves and displays what the novel portrays as female performance through actions, clothes, and other attributes. Her life and upbringing have taught her to become a hybrid character, adopting the strategies that lead to power at a given moment. 'Alyā has based her performance on her childhood experiences, which have taught her that there are only two positions available in her fictional society: dominating or dominated, an understanding of society shared by the other characters. But by her own actions and choices, she has negated this duality, and instead proved that power relations are fluctuant. Through her, and the other characters', changing perceptions of the force relations, her actions have taken her back and forth between dominated and dominating. By performing her version of sexual behaviour, 'Alyā has violated gender, class and social norms and is prepared to do it again. In a way, she has overcome domination by resisting the process of subject formation (Haugaard 2022: 347); nonetheless, the more important question of transformation of power structures, as posed by Hartsock (1989: 170), remains unanswered. The novel has identified relations of power and demonstrated how everyday practical activities influence the social order. At the same time, the plot has shown that it is difficult to change the reigning social order. What is more, despite being possible to imitate the actions that grant power within the fixed asymmetrical power structures in place, it is hard, if not impossible, for one character to change said structures in a whole society. To see real change, a larger social movement where actors empower themselves as agents with authority (Haugaard 2022: 353) is needed.

Conclusion

In *Rā'ihāt al-qirfah* Samar Yazbik creates a patriarchal society not unlike Syria of 2008. Through a myriad of sexual relations – forced and consented to – she explores the dynamics and mechanisms of power, and she hints at ways in which the status quo can be changed. By describing the unjust, but still sanctioned, use of power by ‘Alyā’s father and the other male characters, she shows how acceptance, silence and fear allow corrupt systems to continue. She further illustrates that not only those in power but additionally those who can benefit from a protected position, such as the female characters who buy into the patriarchal structure, are part of upholding the system. The fact that the patriarchal system is seen as a social norm makes it difficult to distinguish who the victim is and who the perpetrator is, and the roles change over time. This can be read as a parallel to life in a dictatorial state where power can only be gained through adherence to certain roles and citizens are trapped in a situation where they both suffer from, and uphold, the system. In the novel, Yazbik examines the foundations of masculine power through the character of ‘Alyā and her observations and imitation of male behaviour. The character’s development can be read as an experiment where the unexpected happens and a female ascertains a certain level of power, but it can just as well be read as a lesson that violence only feeds more violence since the assaults ‘Alyā lived through as a young girl leads to her assaulting others. The novel further shows that power is only valid if it is accepted by those subjugated to it: when ‘Alyā’s position is questioned by her mistress, her authority crumbles and she must flee. Although ‘Alyā seems unbothered by this turn of events and ready to meet new adventures, the ending can be read as a question into the successfulness of the power structures she has learnt – maybe is it time to think of something new?

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