

## The “Urmann” is a Woman

A Re-reading of Yūsuf Idrīs’ *Abū ar-riḡāl*

Jolanda Guardi

### Abstract (Italiano)

Questo articolo presenta un’analisi del racconto *Abū ar-riḡāl* di Yūsuf Idrīs. Pubblicato dallo scrittore egiziano nel 1988, il testo affronta l’omosessualità partendo da un’idea differente da quella di mascolinità prevalente in Egitto nel discorso sociale e politico degli anni Ottanta del XX secolo. Il tema, presente nella produzione letteraria in lingua araba fin dall’epoca classica, non costituisce di per sé una novità. Originale è il presentare il personaggio omosessuale senza censure o giudizi morali e, soprattutto, il concepire la mascolinità attraverso parametri del tutto diversi rispetto a quelli comunemente presenti nel discorso coevo. Al momento della pubblicazione il racconto passò quasi inosservato al pubblico arabo, mentre gli studiosi in Occidente hanno semplicemente ommesso di affrontare l’argomento nelle poche analisi proposte. Una rilettura di *Abū ar-riḡāl* oggi contribuisce alla ridefinizione del canone letterario.

### Abstract (English)

In this article I propose a close reading of Yūsuf Idrīs’ short story *Abū ar-riḡāl*. This text, published by the Egyptian author in 1988, addresses issues of homosexuality as opposed to the idea of masculinity prevailing in the social and political discourse of the Eighties in Egypt. Homosexuality is not a new subject in Arabic literature. It is in fact present in the literary production in the Arabic language since the Classical Age, and several homosexual characters can be noticed in modern and contemporary literature. The difference stands in presenting homosexuality without censorship or moral judgment, and above all masculinity is conceived by parameters, which are others in respect to those of the state discourse. When the short story was published, it passed almost unnoticed by the Arab reading public while scholars in the West did not discuss the issue at the core of it. Nowadays, when a lot of novels and short stories by Arab women and men writers propose the homosexual character anew, *Abū ar-riḡāl* testifies the presence of different point of views in the Arabic literature.

### Introduction

In 1990, Bruce W. Dunne published a paper with the title “Homosexuality in the Middle East: An Agenda for Historical Research” in which he recalls Joan Scott’s (1986) idea about gender as a useful category of historical analysis. Starting from this point, he analyzes the reasons why homosexuality is a “close subject of enquiry” (Sabine Schmidtke 1999, 261).<sup>5</sup> Among these reasons, he identifies the lack of public debate about sexuality in Arab countries, the fact that homosexuality has become a taboo in official discourse, and that male homosexuality is a neglected subject in historical as well as interdisciplinary scholarship in the Middle East. Dunne, moreover, states that what may be described as a structural myopia of predominant heterosexual scholarship is entirely congruent with the

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<sup>5</sup> In order to let the presence of female scholars emerge, I write the first name of an author the first time I quote her/him.

orientalist epistemological legacy of treating texts (e. g. quranic prohibitions) as constitutive of social realities (Dunne 1990, 56).

Among the different sources that, in his opinion, have to be more studied he quotes modern and contemporary novel. Following Dunne’s work, and almost ten years after the one of Schmidtke (1999), some scholarship was published about homosexuality in classical as well as modern and contemporary Arabic literature. As far as this issue is concerned it is sufficient to quote, among the most recent ones, the works of Hanadi Al-Samman (2008), Samar Habib (2009), and Tarek El-Ariss (2013; for a more detailed literature see Jolanda Guardi and Anna Vanzan 2012). These works do not overcome a binary reading of the homosexual character in Arabic literature: classical, modern and contemporary Arabic literature is the subject of study only relating to the negative portrayal of the homosexual character. On the contrary, what I try to let emerge is a more nuanced reading; I am looking for writings in modern Arabic literature that are not male-/mainstream and that present a different writer’s attitude towards the homosexual character, describing her/him in a positive way (Guardi 2012; Guardi 2014; Guardi 2015).

### The Urmann is a Woman

This paper focuses on a close reading of *Abū ar-riḡāl*,<sup>6</sup> a short story published in 1987 by Egyptian author Yūsuf Idrīs. Idrīs (1927-1991) was one of the most prominent Egyptian writers. Although he wrote more than thirty novels and devoted himself to the writing of plays too, it is in the short stories that he achieved the peak of his literary talent. At that time he began to write, the literary field was permeated by the heritage of the Egyptian New School (*al-madrassa al-ḥadītha*) that preached for a writer who could describe life as painful as it is in order to bring reality to the general reader. As one of the members of this New School puts it, “stories should be based on naked facts and accurate observations without any interference of the imagination” (Marcel Kurpershoek 1981, 13). Idrīs himself once stated that he began to write because of his political engagement (Kurpershoek 1981, 50). In fact, his political engagement began in 1945, when he arrived at the University in Cairo to study Medicine and joined the Marxist inspired group Executive Committee for Armed Struggle (*Al-laḡna at-tanfīdiyya li-l-kifāh al-muṣallāh*), while he simultaneously wrote for some leftist journals.<sup>7</sup> Idrīs was deeply patriot and believed in the nation as an ontological category, and that a strong Egypt would free all Egyptians from poverty and misery. The Communist organizations of the time aimed at liberation through the national struggle which was seen as the basis for the class struggle that, following the national independence, would eventually lead to socialism. Leftist intellectuals saw Nāṣir’s revolution as a necessary stage within their program, and Nāṣir increasingly came to use the language of the left wing to describe his vision of a strong and sufficient nation. In 1950, Idrīs began to distribute his radical publication, *Everyman’s Magazine*, and this led to his arrest and a one-year suspension from the University of Cairo (Kurpershoek 1981, 25-26). The support to Nāṣir’s regime

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<sup>6</sup> The story was published on 1st November 1987 in the Egyptian magazine *Uktubīr* (40-45). In 1988 an English translation followed, which does not fully correspond to the original Arabic text. The Arabic text I refer to is Yūsuf Idrīs 1990, 409-449. The book has a double page numbering, one for the collection and the other referring to the original edition in the short stories book *Al-atb alā an-naṣar* (81-121). All translations from Arabic, where not otherwise stated, are mine.

<sup>7</sup> He was also imprisoned three times, under both the monarchy and the ‘Abd an-Nāṣir regime.

lasted until 1954, when the Egyptian leader changed his attitude toward the Communist Party and the leftists in general stating, for example, “Take communists [...] we know this type of person aims only at anarchies, for they can only live in anarchy. They are printing leaflets filled with lies and deception... Their appearances are rosy, but under the surface, they are filled with grudges [...]” (Keith Wheelock 1960, 42-43). In the same year, Idrīs criticized Nāṣir’s policy, because of the presence of British technicians in the Suez Canal Zone although it was nationalized as Egyptian. He was arrested and put in the al-Qanāṭir prison for political prisoners (Kurpershoek 1981, 25-26). That is to say, Idrīs was an engaged author who tried to write for the “common Egyptian reader” and, in order to achieve his goal, he chose subjects and ways of writing close to this reading public.

This attitude lasted until the end of the Seventies, after Gamāl ‘Abd an-Nāṣir defeat when, although remaining devoted to Egypt as a nation, he became more interested in the psychological dimension of the human being (the medical studies helped him in the observation of human personalities and empathy). This change reflects in his prose that although always addressed to a general reader becomes closer and closer to poetry, and, therefore, a bit more cryptic:

anadiplosis (repetition and duplication), synaesthesia (the use of one sense-impression to refer to another), asyndeta and parataxis (the stringing together of clauses without any joining words), onomatopoeia, inversion, rhyme, and paranomasia (punning and other wordplay) are all distinctive features of the later period. (Kurpershoek 1981, 70-75)

The shift to the psychological dimension involved a move back towards a more traditional way of writing too. In fact, Idrīs introduced spoken language in his writings – not only in the dialogues – aiming to shorten the gap between the author and the reader; while in his latest works, vernacular is once again confined to dialogues only. Nonetheless, his main features as a writer remain: the ability to move freely through the whole social spectrum, the diversity of human characters, in a word “the breadth of his fictional world.” (Sabry Hafez 2007, 148)

One of the themes Idrīs uses to convey his ideas about Egyptian society and to discuss moral and political issues is sex, which he uses to present and analyze the multifaceted aspects of love and as metaphor of social and political relations in the Egyptian society.

Idris describes specific sexual relationships between men and women from different social backgrounds in a way which shows the interrelation of their position in society with their attitude to sex, and so imposes a pattern on elusive but crucial aspects of Egyptian life and creates a starting point for thought and understanding... (Catherine Cobham 1994, 47)

As we will see, not only did Idrīs face to the issue of man-woman relationships, but he explore sexual relation between men and the issue of transgender in at least one short story. This should not astonish as Idrīs had more than once the opportunity to express his idea of literature and of the writer’s role in society

The important question is: did these millions of letters, words and pages succeed in changing people’s mentality? Is the average person so influenced by what he reads that he becomes

convinced of opinions he would otherwise never have embraced? That is, to my mind, the only valid criterion for judging the significance of one’s writings. (Kurpershoek 1981, 52)

Idrīs was perfectly aware of his role as a writer, and he can be considered among the vanguard of activist in literature. He was committed to promote social and political change using his writings, his commitment was so strong that he considers most of his critics’ attitude meaningless too:

Some turn me into a case like ‘The development of the Arabic Story in our Modern World’, ‘The Language of Yusuf Idris’, ‘The Attitude of the Author and How it Should Be’. This does not interest me in the least; these things are studied in the kindergarten of literature. (Kurpershoek 1981, 124)

Therefore, I will read *Abū ar-riġāl* starting from the perspective of a committed writer who wants to tell something through his story, and this “something” is what I am looking for.

Scholars who reviewed *Abū ar-riġāl* or wrote from a critical perspective about this short story<sup>8</sup> did not even mention homosexuality. Following I will argue that Idrīs, contrary to what some scholars affirmed – when not completely avoiding the subject of homosexuality in the short story – with *Abū ar-riġāl* wants to make boundaries in which male/female concepts are defined in Egypt become blurred and wants respect and dignity to emerge as not depending on one’s sexual orientation. Moreover, he challenges the possibility to deconstruct the perception of the homosexual in Egypt, and in the Arab world in general, through literature. The writer is in some way a prophet, because he can read reality, and anticipate tendencies already present in society; he has, therefore, the moral duty to make the reader think and discuss some issues, proposing truthful pictures of his vision.

In reading *Abū ar-riġāl* I will refer to an epistemological frame I discussed elsewhere (Jolanda Guardi 2014) keeping in mind that mine is a critical reading resting on the concept of serendipity, that is, more exposed to find something I am not looking for,<sup>9</sup> in the sense Joseph Allen Boone points out:

“reading between the lines” signifies, for my purposes, a *critical* sensitivity to complexity and nuance as well as a *creative* ability [...] to take the “betweenness” of the words that form the “lines” on the page as opportunities for rumination, for teasing out the latent possibilities of meaning that their choice, arrangement connotative possibilities, and placement within a larger units of structure and generic modes suggest; such a mode of reading helps us perceive the subtle ideological layerings and psychological compulsions that compel the narrative inscription in the first place. In the same vein, “reading deeply”, means to suggest the activity of paying sustained attention to the multiple discourses that comprise any narrative act, entertaining

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<sup>8</sup> The critical essays on *Abū ar-riġāl* are in fact quite few: Saad Elkhadem, “Preface” in Yusuf Idris, 1988, 1-2; Idris 1990, 25-28; Abu Al-Ma’ati Abu Al-Naja 1994, 97-104. Ramzi Salti, 2001, is the only one who suggests a different reading, taking into account the presence of homosexuality.

<sup>9</sup> The word *serendipity* was used for the first time by Horace Walpole in a letter he addressed to the diplomat T. Mann. In his letter Walpole explains that the coin is taken from a Persian fairy tale’s title, *The three princes of Serendip*, whose heroes “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of”. Serendipity, therefore, is to find something useful or pleasant one is not looking for. But to notice the clue, the sign which will bring to the discovery, one has to be open to search and attentive in recognizing the value of experiences that do not correspond to the original expectations (Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber, 2004).

both the synchronic and diachronic paths that words, phrases, sentences, style, repetition, and verbal echoes and dissonances create in a text. (Joseph Allen Boone 2014, XXV. *Italic by the author*)

I am aware that such a reading could be subjected to criticism insofar as queer reading is in the end a Western construct (Samar Habib 2010, xix) but I am also aware that a text is what “let itself be read in it”.<sup>10</sup> By applying the principles described by Boone, it is possible to read novels and short stories in a more suitable way for the XXI century. In the end if it is possible to cast light on some neglected aspects, it does not mean the author was fully conscious of it while writing but it implies the presence of these elements also without the writer’s conscious consent.

As previously mentioned, *Abū ar-riḡāl* has been read in the simplest way as possible: a man in his fifties discovers, or better comes to terms, with his latent homosexuality which means becoming a woman and this is of course seen in a negative way. In reviewing the English translation, Issa Bouallata, speaks, for example, of “unusual subject matter” (Issa Bouallata 1989, 83); Roger Allen prefers to concentrate himself on the stylistic aspect (Roger Allen 1989, 360-361) and Abu Al-Naja stops his critical essay just before the last paragraphs of the story (Abu al-Naja 1994). As correct as these readings might be, in my opinion only Ramzi Salti addresses some interesting questions, as for example: “Is Idris [...] attempting to dispel existing negative stereotypes of the homosexual in Egyptian society? [...] is Idris’ work homophobic or is it enabling to gay movements, however obscure in the Arab world?” (2001, p. 247).

The title of the short story is *Abū ar-riḡāl*. Elkhadem (1990, 25) argues that the original title was *al-kumūn* (الكمون) a word which means “latency” – especially in the psychiatric expression *marḡalat al-kumūn* (latency phase) – but then, upon request of the publisher, the author changed it. The request was motivated by the fact that *al-kumūn* in Arabic is written in the same way of *al-kammūn*, (الكمون) which means “cumin”, and this could have caused some misunderstandings. The same word, anyway, can also be read as *al-kamūn*, that is, “one who hides his real condition” (Albin de Biberstein Kazimirski 1860, 931). This reading is, according to me, more close to Idrīs original intent. As it may be, the final title is *Abū ar-riḡāl*. This late expression – where *Abū* means “father” and *riḡāl* “men” – is commonly used in Arabic to design something or someone who is the archetype, i. e., in the case of the short story, *Abū ar-riḡāl* is the archetypal man, the *Urmann*. Following this interpretation, the *Urmann* represents the model to which every man has to conform or tends to conform to; the *Urmann* is the original, the one who presages or underlies those coming later and who remains the reference for them all.

In this sense, the story refers to the characteristics which should be those of this original man, because it dismantles the idea of a manly man as represented in the imagery of the Arab world and the Egyptian culture in particular. In fact, Sulṭān, the protagonist, says at some point of his stream of consciousness:

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<sup>10</sup> As Julia Kristeva affirms: “Le texte n’est pas un ensemble d’énoncés grammaticaux ou agrammaticaux: il est ce qui se laisse lire à travers la particularité de cette mise ensemble de différentes strates de la signifiante ici présente dans la langue dont il éveille la mémoire: l’histoire” (1969, 18. *Italics by the author*).

Man is not a man because of the thickness of his beard or the harshness of his cruelty. No. Man is a man because he is witty, generous, brave, capable of sacrifice, of helping whom is in trouble and able to stand on the side of the oppressed, and the weak one until he becomes strong; and to be against the strong until he acts with justice and changes, and his strength is put at the service of justice and truth. (Idrīs 1990, 430)

*Abū ar-riġāl* – divided into twelve sections – begins with Sulṭān, whom the reader understands being a man of power – who starts noticing some changes in his body due to the coming of age (he is in his fifties). He looks at himself in the mirror and suddenly he does not recognize the image the mirror reflects back: “He wide opened his eyes and understood it was as if he was looking at another man’s skin. This was not his skin, not at all. Alternatively, if it was, something had happened to it” (Idrīs 1990, 411). Starting from the outer appearance Sulṭān perceives subtle changes in his body, which correspond to a slight shift in his mind and soul from being a man to being another man “Or... or... what?” (Idrīs 1990, 423).

Feeling the change in his body, Sulṭān begins to make a sort of examination of his whole life, through flashbacks and memories, starting from a piece of cloth; in fact, on this particular day he does not wear his usual Western clothes, instead he prefers to put on his white *ġallabiyya*, a traditional man-dress, which reminds him of his father. Recalling his father’s life, he remembers how he had only one *ġallabiyya* and how his own mother washed it every night with some orange blossom’s water in the laundry so the next day it seemed like a new one (Idrīs 1990, 420). The *ġallabiyya* becomes a symbol throughout the whole text: it’s white – referring to a sort of soul purity – and deeply bound to Sulṭān’s father personality:

Poverty and pride, particular to the wretched’s army, those who have got no important relatives, no big family, and confront a barren life, without caring either for a worn-out dress or for protecting their honour, they even accept begging during holidays, and if someone gives them meat for a special occasion, they thank and praise the donor... Sulṭān’s father was one of them, this is true, or on the contrary, maybe he was even poorer than some of them, but no one compared him in personal pride. He walked as if he was the mayor, and when he spoke, it was as if his words were words of wisdom. (Idrīs 1990, 420)

While Sulṭān dresses up, he screams for a boy, but he does not recognize even his voice, once more as if it was heard for the first time. That is to say, “before” the transformation, only power, violence, and killing give Sulṭān the thrill of being alive. However, the change is so complete that now he feels he is alive when he is overwhelmed by tenderness. In fact, as he looks or even thinks of aṭ-Ṭawr (the Bull), one of his subalterns, Sulṭān is besieged by consciousness. Consciousness that he was not looking at him as “a man look to another man”, but instead looking at him as a dream, a feeling which lets him exhausted like after a fever, which gives him shivers through his whole body (Idrīs 1990, 414). From this point on, the story proceeds alternating Sulṭān’s streams of consciousness, recalling his childhood and his youth searching for traces of his otherness and the developing of the plot, where Sulṭān tries to approach the young man and to ask him – although in a silent way – to have sex with him. The first line introduces the reader to another character, the one of “Šāhīn” aṭ-Ṭaḥān (Idrīs 1990, 432).

“Šāhīn” aṭ-Ṭaḥān was one of the many phenomena that some rural villages specialize in, whether in Lower or Upper Egypt. He was a man in appearance and figure, with beard and moustache shaven; this aside, he was feminine in everything else, in the way he spoke, the way he walked, his attachment to womenfolk in the village, and even in his work. He used to sell butter, smen, and cream and would seduce the young teenage boys of the village with the amount of money he would pay. He used to have an agent among the young loafers who would bring them to him in exchange for money. He was famous and well known to people in the village. He was deplored by many prudish and religious folks, but for normal people, and due to his long history and the fame of his habits, he was seen as one of those normal phenomena that were not condemned, but became an object of ridicule to some and used as an example by mothers to warn their sons of the consequences if they acted softly, or if they grew their hair long, or wore their skullcaps in a crooked way on their heads. (Joseph Massad 2007, 330)

This passage describes an effeminate homosexual, who is well known by the whole village, but whose behaviour is not condemned. Although some mock him and others use him as a warning example, the author’s attitude is not the one of blaming, on the contrary: the name – or maybe the nickname (as it is written between inverted commas through the whole story) of aṭ-Ṭaḥān is “Šāhīn”, a word of Persian origin which in Arabic denotes the royal hawk. That is, his nickname is a very positive one. Nicknames have a great importance in *Abū ar-riḡāl*. The title itself, which is Sulṭān’s nickname, and it means “the one who has power”. The importance of nicknames is underlined in the text by the protagonist himself when speaking by himself he states:

Why had he chosen to meet “aṭ-Ṭawr” at that moment? He did not know that too. aṭ-Ṭawr. aṭ-Ṭawr. Why then “aṭ-Ṭawr” exactly? Maybe for the rumors spreading about him and his love affairs? Because he knew women just fall at his feet when he possessed them? Or maybe because he was younger, more stupid and the heftiest of the boys? Anyway he calls him... aṭ-Ṭawr (The Bull)... in the same way, there were “ad-Dīb” (the Wolf), “Abū al-ḡaṣāda” (the One who lacks something), “Ġurāb albīn” (the Albin crow), “al-Ġaḡṣ” (the Colt), “at-Tanbal” (the Sloth)... each of them... the biggest present he could do was exactly to give a nickname, the major castigation he inflicted was to call someone by his real name. This late would have begged him, implored him until he broke into tears, sometimes crying bitter tears, asking him to give him a nickname. When he got tired of him and his siege, he answered: “All right... go, Lamb”... or “Go away, Donkey”... And the “Lamb” or the “Donkey” would release him, and kiss his hand, with his eyes bright with gratitude. Then he would have gone happy and smiling, glad. (Idrīs 1990, 415)

Although most of these nicknames are nouns, their role is the one of adjectives, which are

mechanism born from queer, foreign places. [...] In language, adjectives occupy the place of difference: added on, as it were, not necessary for making a complete sentence yet paradoxically responsible for invoking being. Adjectives, as such, do not organize the world to render it familiar. They are the defamiliarizing devices of language. While they cannot be activated by verbs, they are in and of themselves active [...] As mechanisms, they work to attach us to non-linguistic sexed being and its queer affects. (Dina Georgis 2013, 127)

Therefore, the homosexual character is presented with a positive attitude, as his nickname suggests. Proceeding in the recalling of his life, we learn that Sulṭān is married and has three children. In a way, he then accomplished his social – heteronormative – duty by marrying and having heirs, and this frees him: he can now turn to his real sexual identity. This seems to be the opinion, for example, of another Egyptian writer, Naḡīb Maḥfūz, who describes a homosexual character in his novel *Midaq Alley* (1947). Kirša, who considers himself free to follow his orientation once he has absolved to his duty – getting married and having children.

The second line, the development of the plot, describes how Sulṭān approaches the young man to have intercourse with him. Here the focus is on what both characters think and feel. The young man understands what Sulṭān wants from him but he initially thinks he is the one who has to surrender and act like “a woman” losing his self-respect and the one of the others’, because he knows he cannot refuse to do it in front of his boss. The approaching is not immediate, because it does not develop through words but through glances, breathings, and imperceptible movements, and during all this silent approach both Sulṭān and aṭ-Ṭawr wander about the most intimate paths of the self. Once more Sulṭān recalls some episodes of his life, to detect scents of his feminine nature which he finds. For instance, he recalls an episode occurred sometime before when it was easy for him “to make decisions”. A man of his came asking for justice – or revenge – because thugs assaulted him. All the men came, and it was as if they were “thousands”; all of them were waiting for the word coming from his mouth, as they were used to, and they knew it would have been an aggressive and ferocious word., “How happened what happened?”, this time his voice was not the voice he was used to as he heard himself saying: “I think this time we should give in and surrender and then we will choose a better time and place.” That day, Sulṭān, the leader, the lion, became a mouse, and he noticed people did no more fear him (Idrīs 1990, 434-438).

Then he remembers a discussion he had with “Šāhīn” aṭ-Ṭaḥān’s nephew regarding the homosexuality of the nephew’s uncle. One day, as a group of men lead by Sulṭān met with Aḥmad – the boy’s name - they began to tease him for his family relationship with “Šāhīn” aṭ-Ṭaḥān. The boy was holding a book in his hand, and Sulṭān asked him to show what he was reading. As he saw the title of the book, *Mawwāl Adham aš-Šarqāwī*,<sup>11</sup> he began to laugh, and said: “Ah ah... your uncle is “Šāhīn” aṭ-Ṭaḥān and you read Adham aš-Šarqāwī...” (Idrīs 1990, 442), the contrast here stands in the fact that Aḥmad’s uncle was a *muḥannaṭ*,<sup>12</sup> as he is called throughout the text, while Adham aš-Šarqāwī was a boy who died while fighting against English colonization in Egypt and he is considered a hero, that is a “real” man.<sup>13</sup> The hero, or *fidāī* as he was often called in the Seventies, is literally “the one who sacrifices himself”, and “is loaded with religious connotations. Having devoted his life to the

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<sup>11</sup> The *mawwāl* is a genre of Arabic music that is usually presented before the actual song begins and it is traditionally sung in colloquial Arabic. It is a development from Arabic poetry and the performance is the occasion for the singer to demonstrate his ability with melodic improvisation.

<sup>12</sup> Although I translated the word with “homosexual”, due to the description the author gives of him (manly appearance) the term *muḥannaṭ* in Arabic traditionally refers to men dressed like women who performed dances and singing. Idrīs’ words choice all along the short story is clearly very shrewd.

<sup>13</sup> Adham aš-Šarqāwī (1898-1921) was a young Egyptian whose opposition against the British forces is narrated in several movies and television plays as well as the subject of songs. He is often depicted as an Arab Robin Hood, taking from riches and giving to poors. He was also taken as an example by the Egyptian president Anwār as-Sadāt in his book *Al-baḥṭ ‘an ad-dāt* (In search of the Self).

sacred cause, [he] embraces the blessing of martyrdom. Accordingly, [he embodies] the idealized masculinity whose valiant and hallowed struggle against the enemy” makes him being considered “by many as a prophet” (Samira Agachy 2009, 5). Moreover, Aḥmad’s age allows a further comparison: he and the hero are young and do not submit to power. In fact, the day after this incident, Aḥmad assaults Sulṭān with a pruning knife and says he will not let him go until he admits being a “woman” (Idrīs 1990, 443). Sulṭān admits and “What threw him most into confusion was that he did not utter that to save himself or to submit to the actual situation, but he had told that as finally taking a deep restoring breath: I am a woman” (Idrīs 1990, 444). After that episode, thinking about what happened, Sulṭān says to himself: “No doubt I am not the man I used to be... no doubt that there was a Ṭaḥān inside me that this boy made come out with his deeds, but then, what’s the problem if a human being is a Ṭaḥān?” (Idrīs 1990, 446).

At the same time, we become aware of The Bull’s stream of consciousness, which flows at the same time of Sulṭān’s one. The young man understands that something is going on, and after a deep thinking, realizes what the request will be. We know this, once again, through Sulṭān’s thoughts (Idrīs 1990, 447).

The idea of submitting himself to this young man, who was awfully frightened of him and of his potency and his vigour, made him think – among other things - that Bull might be imagining the opposite, and was trembling for fear that his Uncle Sulṭān would request from him what the stronger requests from the weaker; for Sulṭān requests were sacred commands that could not be evaded or circumvented. A sacred command which is uttered by Sulṭān – oh, what a disaster! – had to be obeyed, and he would submit to his will, even if this submission would cost him his masculinity, his pride, his distinctive character, and his reputation, which had made him famous for being the only unrestrained stallion who made all men jealous, and made all women, married or unmarried, dream of him. (Elkham 1988, 9)

In the closing section of the short story, the reader understands the sexual intercourse between the two men takes place. The Bull, who after a long struggle within himself has “reconciled himself to accept” being the passive in the intercourse, is

surprised when it happened what happened. Happy. To succeed, although it happened in a different way, it was not important; important is that he came to a condition by which equate this or that. Everything ended, and his shirt was soaked with the scent of lost honour, the revolved dignity, and of a degradation he enjoyed and which he savoured – scents that can only provoke disgust together but which never made him disgusting. (Idrīs 1990, 448)

After that Sulṭān notices that acting like “a woman” means to be more reflective, to make decisions after deep thinking, to judge men and people in general not by appearance but by the way they act and are, and to feel tenderness. “As the veil of masculinity dropped from him so did the veil of shame”.

As for the majority of his short stories, Idrīs structures *Abū ar-riḡāl* in a circular form, and the action ends back to the point where it began. “This technique emphasises cyclical continuity and stresses the main action of the story as a temporary move, but at the same time one can animate and

pervade the whole cycle in a way that leaves its mark on the next revolution. Idrīs therefore deliberately avoids sudden endings and denouements” (Hafez 2007, 156). The end of *Abū ar-riḡāl* is a positive one, because Sulṭān has reconciled himself with his being “a woman” and only now, the ‘boys’ surrounding him – and who supposedly are or will be his lovers – get a name instead of a nickname: “He observes his skin and it is as wonderful, when the night comes, and he is on the balcony or at the hotel, before him Fathī “at-Ṭawr” or Ibrāhīm “al-Ġaḥš” or Sa’īd “al-Baḡal” (the Donkey) or Šabrī “al-Kalb” (the Dog). But he is still as-Sulṭān, he is still the lion” (Idrīs 1990, 449).

### Concluding remarks

In another short story, *Aš-šāyḥ šāyḥa* (Idrīs no date, 16-30),<sup>14</sup> Idrīs proposes a character who is neither a man or a woman. She/he has no name and people call her/him sometimes Šayḥ Muḥammad and sometimes Šayḥa Fāṭima, because (Idrīs 1990, 17-18):

As to his having human features, he had features all right: he had two eyes, two ears and a nose, and he walked on two feet, but the problem was that these features of his took completely inhuman shapes. [...] His short, heavy, kinky, brushlike hair brought home a problem that called for attention since there were no tokens of femininity in it, and that it was also devoid of any tokens of masculinity. His body was heavy, of average height, and solid and large like a wall, but his face bore no signs of beard or a moustache. (Denys Johnson-Davies 2009, location 3364)

Although the story ends with the protagonist’s death, this is due to the inhabitants suspicion she/he is not deaf and speechless as she/he appears and not for her/his sexual ambiguity, which is accepted by the villagers.

In both cases the protagonists refer to marginal sexualities in a cultural context that proposes a normative image of masculinity, the one of a manliness where men assert, “what they believe to be their manhood” (George L. Mosse 1996, 191). This idea of masculinity is a “horizontal comradeship” (Benedict Anderson 1983, 7) with the nation and constitutes the power that in the world of ideas will free the land. “Men are supposed to possess an unshakable commitment and a clear teleological vision and course of action that will grant them the badge of courage to regain the lost land” (Agachy 2009, 7). Whereas official discourses express a nationalistic rhetoric conceiving the nation as heterosexual and homosocial, setting men at the margins, Idrīs uncovers what in the religious and political discourse is considered shameful and deconstructs the image of Egypt as a nation composed by Muslim manly men who are guardians of the family and who live a normative, strictly defined sexuality (and sexual orientation).

Šulṭān, as other characters in his short stories, is a frustrated man, but even if failure is dominant, it is never a complete “failure, because at the lowest ebb of defeat there always appears a possibility of advancement, a reason for a special type of triumph” (Hafez 2007, 152). He defies the bourgeois nationalistic concept that homosexuals are a threaten to the middle-class existence itself

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<sup>14</sup> Quotes are taken from the English translation (*The Shaykh Shaykha*) published in Denys Johnson-Davies 2009, 203-214. Translation by Raja Fahmi and Saneya Shaarawi Lanfranchi. All quotes are taken from this translation in the kindle edition of the book.

(Mosse 1997, 27). A concept dating back to the end of the XIX century, when a new social class emerged in Egypt which defined itself in the performance of the “Effendi Masculinity” and which is linked to the attempt to free and define an Egyptian self from the colonial gaze through a matter of sex and gender (Wilson Chacko Jacob 2011, location 207).

Through the character of Sulṭān, the Egyptian male reader is confronted with an alternative manhood, which is not shameful. It is not shameful because it has some of the female features, like tenderness and a pondering attitude.

The re-reading of *Abū ar-riḡāl* – as well as the one of other “forgotten” texts in modern and contemporary Arabic literature – also contributes to a redefinition of the literary canon. In fact, considering these writings contributes in overcoming a binary analysis of Arabic literature, where the non-heteronormative discourse cannot get a foothold. This obliges to a redefinition of the concept of the canon because, as Eve Kofosky Sedgwick states (2011, 59): “To alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure” (Kofosky Sedgwick 1990, 26). To alienate the word, in the literary field, was the basis for homophobic violence and oppression from the nineteenth century until today, because it is through literature that we figure out Other’s image. “Reading these writings” then, “will be most useful for our analysis in way that laws, police reports, official histories, school textbooks, private letters, scholarly publications – the usual archive of the social and intellectual historian – are not” (Massad, 2007: 271).

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Jolanda Guardi's research focuses on dynamics of the intellectuals and power especially as deployed in Arabic literature and gender issues, subjects about which she has extensively published in Italian, Spanish, English, French, and Arabic. In 2010, she was awarded the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques International Award for Translation, and in 2011 she was named Theologian Honoris Causa. She contributed with entries in the two volumes *Encyclopaedia Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture* (2014), which was awarded in 2015 the RUSA Award for “Outstanding Reference Sources”. She conducts at present her research at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili of Tarragona (Spain).