

# **A Forbidden Act: Illicit Sex and the Colonial Heterosexual Matrix**

By Rain Tiller

**ABSTRACT.** This paper will discuss the cases in which illicit sex becomes mechanisms of disruption. The first section will explore the theoretical underpinnings of sex and the body as an access point to politics and normative critique. Then, I will discuss the examples of illicit sex in the novels *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Woman at Point Zero*. It is important to study the role of sex in literature to expand the symbolic understanding of sex and sexuality. It is also necessary to bring an analysis of colonial dynamics to sexuality studies in order to fully critique the racial and historical dynamics within sexuality and the establishment of sexual norms.

## **Illicit Sex**

Forbidden sex, bad sex, illicit sex: it is more than just an act of pleasure and science; it is a symbolic act against the greater normative regime. Illicit sex involves sexual acts marked outside the androcentric heterosexual norms, including queer sex, extramarital sex, sex work, and sex between the colonizer and the colonized. This paper will base the concept of “illicit sex” as discussed in earlier works, such as *Thinking Sex*, that analyze sexuality in a framework of social organization. In *Thinking Sex*, Rubin (1984) shapes the concept of forbidden sex and non-normativity. Rubin (1984) defines forbidden sex as non-heterosexual, non-normative sexual-gender relations and argues that societal modernization created sexual stratification that othered, non-normative sex, like queer sex and sex work (p. 18). Rubin’s conceptualizations of illicit sex and sexual

stratification are at the foundation of this paper's analysis of sex as a radical paradigmatic act in colonized societies.

In the novels *Women of Sand and Myrrh* by Hanan Al-Shaykh (1989/2010) and *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi (1975/2007), illicit sex—or non-normative sexual relations—creates real and theoretical pathways for women to disrupt the colonial heterosexual matrix. Both novels are set in the Middle East and center on the lives of women, specifically how both women navigate colonial patriarchy and sexual crises. Centering this paper's analysis on Middle Eastern literature strives to incorporate feminist voices from a region widely disparaged in neocolonial rhetoric on the issues of women's rights and sexuality. The framework of illicit sex as resistance against colonial heterosexuality can be applied to other literary pieces from colonized regions.

### **Theory: Colonial Heterosexuality**

Understanding that sex and sexuality interact with a normative framework established by the Western patriarchy is integral to analyzing the novels. Patriarchy as a modulator of female sexuality is not a new concept in feminist theory. Judith Butler's (1988) discussion of gender as a temporary, historicized state created from the repetition of certain acts places theoretical importance on the concept of an "act." Butler (1988) argues that these gender "acts" are not individual instances, but rather a collective transaction that is both discrete and explicit. In this framework, heterosexuality is a biological and cultural reproductive act; heterosexual intercourse reinforces the binary gender difference. Adrienne Rich's (1980) work on "compulsory heterosexuality" frames normative heterosexual intercourse as not just the construction of gender relations, but the deconstruction of queer existence and community. Rich (1980) highlights instances of "marriage resistance." of women refusing to marry, as a consistent historical example of women exerting autonomy through the rejection of heteronormative acts.

Butler (1988) and Rich's (1980) work demonstrates how sex is both an individual act and an emblem of a larger paradigm. This concept is the foundation of this paper's argument that non-normative sex, sex marked outside the bounds of marital heterosexuality, is an act of women's resistance, as well as women's production of alternative sexual spaces. In the context of colonial politics, the conceptualization of heterosexual sex as an integral act to upholding normative power dynamics offers insight into the role of sex and gender configurations in the assertion of colonial power. Analyzing heteronormativity and colonialism together creates a framework of multiple relations of power and represents an intersection of gender, sexuality, and colonial white supremacy as overlapping historical processes. Lugones (2007) in "Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" argues that the gender binary and heteronormative paradigm is a violent reconfiguration of identity and behavior among colonized peoples by historical Western powers. In the colonial framework, compulsory heterosexuality as a buttress of the gender binary is not just a mechanism of male dominance, but of white European male dominance over colonized people, particularly women of color. Moreover, colonial heterosexual dominance is not just a matter of white men's sexual access to brown bodies, but also an issue of colonial control over the social classification system and the reproduction of the European gender system within colonized societies. Lugones (2007) highlights this process as the crux of the transformation of colonized societies from egalitarian to hierarchical patriarchies, which structurally inhibits colonized women.

In the context of the Middle East, in which the two novels are set, the colonialism of gender and sexuality is important. In *Policing Egyptian Women*, Kozma (2011) argues that the formalization of the state and codification of laws, constructed by colonial processes and legacies, enforced oppressive restrictions on women's bodies. In her discussion of prostitution and women's sexuality, Kozma

(2011) argues that the empowerment of a post-colonial police force intended to control female sexuality through the regulation of women's bodies in public space (p. 79). On a spectrum, women who had to occupy public space for economic survival—whether or not they were sex workers—were all deemed ambiguously “disreputable,” but women who were engaging in the “illicit activity” of sex work were treated as a public moral crisis by the state and self-policing elites (Kozma 2011, p. 80). Kozma (2011) states that “the prostitute was threatening because women's sexuality was believed to be treacherous” (p. 80). In Kozma's (2011) argument, the police force is a manifestation of the colonial penetrative concepts of modernity and statehood, and the police subsequently regulate women's sexuality as a mode of social control and maintenance of colonial patriarchal power. In the framework of illicit sex as an act of resistance and disruption, Kozma's (2011) description of sex workers as a highly-marginalized member of society reinforces the idea that non-normative sex is a compelling act against state norms.

In “Living Sexualities: non-hetero female sexualities in urban middle-class Bangladesh,” Karim (2012) makes a less historical argument than Kozma (2011) and concerns Bangladesh, not an Arab country, but still demonstrates how female sexuality and colonialism intersect. Karim (2011) discusses non-hetero female sexuality as a non-normative sexuality in confrontation with both Bengali spatial-social norms and Western colonial lexicon. In Karim's (2011) piece, labelling is an integral aspect to decolonizing non-normative sexuality; Bengali women create a plurality of culturally-specific and personally-appropriate terms to deconstruct the colonial and confining dynamics of “lesbian” (p. 282). In Karim's (2011) it is not just the act of non-normative sex that is lived resistance, but the surrounding intentionality that decolonizes female sexuality.

This section has described sexual and gender theory as well as historical and social contexts for sexual dynamics in colonized lands. The formation of a colonial vision of a

modern state has been a mechanism of policing women's bodies in law and recreation of a violent heteronormative gender binary regime in colonized societies. By inserting the concept of illicit sex as a paradigmatic act, one can see how non-normative sex confronts the normative sexual-gender system imposed on non-Western states through colonialism. Theoretical and social context regarding the relationships between colonialism, sexual norms, and patriarchal gender regimes is necessary for analyzing the novels in the remainder of the paper.

## **Women of Sand and Myrrh**

*Women of Sand and Myrrh* is a 1989 novel by Hanan Al-Shaykh, a Lebanese author. The novel is set in an unnamed desert country undergoing industrialization, potentially in reference to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. The structure of the novel follows the stories of four women in this desert country as they cope with depression, restricted mobility, marital crises, and cultural tension. This paper is mainly concerned with the relationship between two characters, Suha and Nur, as their friendship transforms into an indulgent and chaotic extramarital affair. Both women engage in queer intimacy—non-normative sex—to find relief from, not only their crumbling heterosexual marriages, but also the limitations of the patriarchal state. Ultimately, their relationship ends in abandonment and mutual distress, but their queer intimacy is a crucial precursor for both characters' self-realization and final liberation from their circumstances.

A significant moment in Suha and Nur's relationship is Suha's burgeoning acceptance of her affair with Nur after an initial struggle. Al-Shaykh (1989/2010) writes:

We'd begun to live our lives together, going to the department store, visiting Suzanne, entering the hotel in fear and trembling and ordering tea and cake only to rise up together after hastily swallowing the tea, because the looks of the other guests were almost beginning to be directed

towards, almost becoming a reproach. We went deep into the desert and saw a mirage of many colours. Instead of receding into the distance, it had come closer to us as we approached it in the car, and then it wasn't a mirage after all. (p. 55)

The passage is a portrayal of how Suha and Nur extricated themselves from state restrictions within their relationship. Al-Shaykh's description of their new daily activities is in direct contrast to the previous illustration of mobility in the section, which is limited to domestic spaces. In this way, Suha's acceptance of her relationship with Nur—demonstrated in the initial “We'd begun to live our lives together”—represents a dramatic shift in Suha's engagement of public space. Not only does their relationship prompt a new wave of movement outside of the home, their coupled interactions with the public also begin to mark them as other. The reproachful looks of the hotel guests is the knowing gaze of the state, the subliminal recognition of Suha and Nur's nonconforming behavior. While shopping and visiting another woman was still in the realm of acceptability, Al-Shaykh introduces a discrete crossing of social boundaries, indicating the point at which the continuing public consummation of their queer relationship became transgressive.

After this moment of transgression, the passage suddenly shifts into a different space. Al-Shaykh turns from the public space into a nature scene of a mirage-like oasis. Nur and Suha's journey “deep into the desert” represents their rejection of the state's heteronormative gaze. The desert oasis is without the structures and supervision of the public, as described earlier in the passage. Al-Shaykh's use of the word “mirage” and “oasis” evokes fantastical imagery of a dreamlike, temporary haven. The oasis is far from the public, isolated, and untouched by the familiar markers of development. Suha and Nur's transition from the public to the dreamy refuge of the oasis symbolizes the escapism of their queerness; with their relationship, they gain access to

space outside the colonial heterosexual regime that defines both public and domestic orders.

As Suha grew in her relationship with Nur, she simultaneously distances herself from her husband, Basem. Al-Shaykh (1989/2010) writes, “My relationship with Basem only existed inside the four walls of the house now; it didn’t even extend to the garden or the car or the street” (p. 56). The limitation of Suha’s marriage to Basem—its conditionality to the domestic space—indicates both the restrictive nature of heterosexual marriage and Suha’s rejection of her marriage. Al-Shaykh’s description of Suha’s marriage to Basem as perfunctory and conditional relates to the compulsory nature of heterosexual marriage; societal functionality and reproduction are the basic characteristics of compulsory heterosexuality as described by Butler (1988) and Rich (1980). At this point, Suha’s intimacy has shifted towards Nur and away from Basem, which is punctuated when Al-Shaykh (1989/2010) continues to write about Suha’s sexual rejection of Basem as well (p. 56).

Ultimately, the relationship between Nur and Suha ends and both of them leave the nameless desert country. While tying the characters’ liberation to their departures from the desert country must be problematized, Suha and Nur’s respective flights are important to understand as the escalation of their affair. Suha and Nur do not leave the desert country because of the Muslim-ness or Arab-ness demonstrated in the novel; they leave because of their marriages and their dissatisfaction with the gender order of society. Their final departures are the external manifestation of the self-actualization the characters underwent throughout their affair. While their queerness created an experiential space in which the two characters could escape the structures of colonial heteronormativity, Suha and Nur’s departures emphasize the women’s need to extricate themselves from the system.

## Woman at Point Zero

*Woman at Point Zero* is a 1975 novel written by the acclaimed Egyptian activist Nawal El Saadawi. The novel follows the life of Firdaus, who is in prison facing execution for murder.

As Firdaus tells the story of her life from the prison cell, the reader learns that Firdaus became a successful sex worker after being tricked into prostitution while escaping her abusive family home. Unlike in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, the illicit, non-normative sex in *Woman at Point Zero* is not primarily concerned with sexual orientation or an intimate relationship, but is instead Firdaus's sex work. Throughout the novel, Firdaus reflects on her sex work as a means to be freer than other women, accumulating in a strong critique of normative heterosexual relationships. While the sex portrayed in the novel is heterosexual, the sex is marked as illicit because of the transactional nature, the illegality, and the marital status of Firdaus's male clients.

El Saadawi's critique of normative heterosexuality and gender roles takes place throughout the novel, but intensifies at the end of the novel upon Firdaus's return to sex work. El Saadawi (1975/2007) writes:

A woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I was able to convince myself that I had chosen this life of my own free will. The fact that I rejected [men's] noble attempts to save me, my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me that this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women. (p. 121)

The passage showcases the straightforward voice of Firdaus and El Saadawi and explicitly addresses the positionality of women in society in relation to sexual access. There are two significant aspects of this passage that underline the role of sex as a disruptive act of resistance: the focus on choice and the comparison between sex work and wives. El Saadawi's emphasis on free will in this passage is noteworthy because

Firdaus's concept of her own freedom is contingent on her ability to choose. This passage is in direct contrast with previous sections in the novel in which Firdaus had no choice to engage in intercourse, whether that be rape or others tricking her into prostitution. In the framework of illicit sex as resistance, the focus on choice as the arbiter of freedom reinforces the concept that sex as an act can liberate women from restrictive sexuality norms.

While the passage does not directly refer to married women in contrast to prostitutes, the comparison Firdaus makes between herself and "other women" is repeated throughout the novel to juxtapose prostitution and marriage. By arguing that sex work allows women more freedom than she would otherwise have, El Saadawi is directly framing illicit, non-normative sex as a liberating act. El Saadawi confronts the transactional nature of the heterosexual paradigm by emphasizing Firdaus's free will and economic success and raising it above the subliminal exchanges of normative, heterosexual relations that do not benefit or empower women. Earlier in the novel, El Saadawi (1975/2007) widens the concept of transactional sexual relations: "All of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and [an] expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one" (p. 102). In this framework, all (heterosexual) sex is oppressive and normative heterosexuality—sex in marriage, sexual access in exchange for implicit benefits—strips women of their ability to own their sexual access, but non-normative sex is a space in which women can exert power over their body, sex, and existence.

When Firdaus is luxuriating in her free will, she states "My body was my property alone, but the land of our country was [men's] alone" (p. 123). Not only is Firdaus exerting agency over her body, she is juxtaposing her body to the state; this comparison reinforces the concept of the state's relationship to the female body and sexual access. In the novel, Firdaus refuses to be carted by the police to a head of state's bed. El Saadawi (1975/2007) writes "I knew nothing about patriotism, [my] country had not only given

me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had, including my honor and dignity” (p. 122). Firdaus’s refusal to bed a head of state on police orders is not just a sexual rejection, but a rejection of the state’s intrusion into her body and the state itself. Firdaus is refusing to be colonized; the police and the anonymous head of state are emblematic of colonial state authorities seeking sexual access to her body. In this way, Firdaus’s agency over her body and sexual access is not just about non-normative sex, but it is also about the rejection of the male colonial access to her body.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, illicit sex is not an alternative to heterosexual norms, but rather a mirror-image of normative heterosexuality that frames the transactional nature of sex and oppression of women in more explicit and economic terms. As seen in the passage, choice is the crucial factor in the use of non-normative sex to reject normative heterosexuality. While Firdaus thrives economically and actively rejects the institution of heterosexual marriage, it is her choice to be a prostitute, not prostitution itself that makes her sex acts disruptive.

## **Conclusion**

The novels *Woman at Point Zero* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* portray two different versions of non-normative sex as an act of resistance. Queerness and sex work in the novels show that non-normative sex is both an act and a sexual orientation; it can involve intimacy, and it can involve trauma. In the case of *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Nur and Suha’s affair was an interpersonal mobilization of non-normative sex to find relief from the restrictive structures of the colonial heteronormative state—their husbands, their limited mobility, their atomization. In contrast, Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* intentionally rejected the entire system of heteronormative society with her sex work. Despite their differences, both novels portray female characters extricating themselves from the oppressive colonial

heteronormative state by choosing to engage in non-normative sex. Suha, Nur, and Firdaus in their respective circumstances all reject the normative institution of marriage in favor of sexual choice and freedom from restrictive gender orders.

The novels *Woman at Point Zero* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* are both strong cases of illicit sex manifesting in different ways but still accumulating in a rejection of colonial heterosexual normativity. By focusing on these two works, this paper intends to include a narrative of colonized women's voices who are denied agency in mainstream neocolonial rhetoric about gender in the Middle East. Moreover, it is necessary to focus on literary works from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America to draw a stronger connection between historic colonialism by Western powers and the sexual stratification in various societies. The theoretical framework presented in this paper is key for understanding not only the sexual argument, but rather an overarching argument about the colonial imposition of restrictive gender and sexuality. This framework is also significant for study of both sexuality and post-colonial societies because it centers women's autonomy and focuses on sex as a liberating act. In future research, the framework of non-normative sex as disruptive to the colonial heteronormative state can be applied to other literary works to include other forms of illicit sex.

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