Postcolonial Transformations
Queering the Narrative in Hasan Namir's *God in Pink*

Sean Weaver

Abstract
Certain complications arise when it comes to national and sexual based formulas of citizenship, especially when bodies are often found in between and on the margins of nations, states, and cultures, a sign of the modern world. As such, it is important to establish new frameworks in order to understand newly emerging bodies as others. In the essay that follows, Hasan Namir's novel, *God in Pink* (2015), will be contextualized as a narrative that posits queerness as a means of overcoming the essentialist binaries created by colonization that dictate who and what is othered through the use of queer bodies that transform normative religious and heteronormative national identities. First, the essay will analyze the ways heteronormative national identities are queered/disturbed by calling attention to the fallacies inherent in singular national dichotomies. Secondly, the essay will address the ways in which queerness is able to transform singular national identities. In doing so, this essay will argue that queer narratives, as represented by *God in Pink*, in colonized spaces offer meant for transforming singular national futures.

Keywords
Gender, Sex, Nation, Culture, Queer Failure, Other, Queer Narrativity, Queer Futurity, Islam

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> Forgive me. I don't know your name. After all, I have only seen you once. I hope you are able to help me since I have no one else to reach out to. I know you must be wondering why, of all people I chose you. I don't have the answer myself. But I can tell you this…*When I looked into your eyes, I thought you were somewhat different.*
>
> Now I begin *my story*. (Namir, 2015, 7, *Emphasis* added)

The passage here opens Hasan Namir's text *God in Pink* (2015), the first novel written by a gay Iraqi man that deals explicitly with homosexuality and Islam in the Middle East. However, setting the author and his background aside for a moment and focusing on the text itself, at first glance, this passage reads seemingly illegibly. Firstly, the narrator refuses to divulge the reason for writing to the specific person reading the passage. Clearly, the narrator articulates their isolation as an outsider in need of help with "no one to turn to." Silence is encrypted in this passage by what is withheld—gender, sex, orientation, nationality, names, places, and individuals. The nameless narrator invites the reader in only to isolate them. Stylistically, the narrator seems to be addressing the reader, "Forgive me, I don't know your name. I have only seen you once." The narrator creates an inversion between the text and the reader. First, the

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narrator subjects the reader to a singular perception, a perception that cannot be returned. Then, the focus is shifted from the narrator to the reader. Finally, the reader must reevaluate their position in comparison to the story about to unfold.

The opening passage, then, becomes disorienting, disruptive, confining, and resistive. Considerably, illegible. The opening passage is signifyingly *queer*. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) Lee Edelman, points to the disruptive and namelessness nature of queerness that this passage personifies. Edelman, pushing against reproductive futurism, explains that queerness "must [always] insist on disturbing…on queering ourselves…" and that queerness can never fully be named nor can it ever truly "define an identity" (17). Instead, Edelman claims that queerness can "only disturb" identities (17). Additionally, Edelman explains that queerness can only ever disturb an identity by "shift[ing] the figural burden of queerness onto someone else" (27). The opening passage becomes more legible by coding queerness as the process by which an identity is only ever disturbed, never named, and shifting queerness onto someone else. Moreover, Edelman's coding of queerness points to the nature of queer narratives and their ability to disrupt dominant narratives and discourses. Therefore, in order for the unnamed narrator to begin what seems like an affirmation of queerness they must first "shift the burden of queerness" onto another individual: *I can tell you this…when I looked you in the eyes I could tell you were different* (Namir, 2015, 7). Once the burden of queerness is shifted, the narrative moves forward with the only affirming line in the entire introduction: Now I will begin *my story.* In this case, the reader becomes the one marked by difference—the outsider. Thus, the narrator's story can only begin once the burden of queerness is passed to someone else. The narrator above is the main protagonist of Namir's novel, a young man by the name of Ramy. As Ramy's narrative unfolds the reader learns that he is a self-identified homosexual. Given that the novel takes place in Iraq, where

homosexuality is condemned by religious institutions, Ramy occupies a place of otherness—he begins his letter with a declaration of helplessness— "I have no one else" (Namir, 2015, 7).

Reading the introduction to *God in Pink* as a moment of disorienting and disruptive queerness points to the ways queer narratives possess the ability to disrupt dominant forms of narrative discourses. One dominant discourse Queer narratives disrupt are narratives of colonization (Abu Assab 2017). Furthermore, in the essay that follows, Namir's novel, *God in Pink*, will be contextualized as a narrative that posits queerness as a means of overcoming the essentialist binaries created by colonization that dictate who and what is othered through the use of queer bodies that transform normative religious and heteronormative national identities. First, the essay will analyze the ways heteronormative national identities are queered/disturbed by calling attention to the fallacies inherent in singular national dichotomies. Secondly, the essay will address the ways in which queerness is able to transform singular national identities. In doing so, this essay will argue that queer narratives, as represented by *God in Pink*, in colonized spaces offer the means to understand how the future of such places offer the key to decolonizing and transforming singular national futures.

I. Imagined Queer(ie)s: Shifting the Narrative of Queerness

To truly understand the ways in which queerness can transform national identities, it must be understood in terms of the way queerness is constructed in the Middle East. The Middle East embodies one place where colonial history and recent interventions by the US and other world powers formed competing discourses of power each with different factions with their own national identities (Abu Assab and Nasser Eddin 2018, 49). While laws that criminalize same-sex relations are non-existent (with the exception of Penal Law Number 19 and the Decree Number 9 that prohibit

homosexuality in the military), religious sects, in the form of nation-states with their own justice systems act outside the jurisdiction of national laws as well as international human rights laws (CTDC 2017; Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2018, 49). However, contextualizing Arab sexualities is more complicated[1]—gender roles, familial relations, and cultural norms overlap and differ from one country to another (Jones and Tell 2018).

Therefore, Iraqi nationality is influenced by multiple cultural discourses each influenced by national narratives—in this case Islam and Western patriarchy reinforce narratives of heterosexuality and family. While the West might interpret sexual relationships as explicitly homosexual, this is not always the case for some Arab men (or women) who engage in same-sex relationships (Haddad 2016). With this in mind, the dominant narrative at work in Iraq is greatly influenced by Western norms and carried out by a narrow interpretation of Islam, resulting in "heteronormative nationalisms on both sides of the postcolonial divide [collaborating] with each other" (Dhawan 2013, 195).

One major aspect of Iraqi national narratives is the connection between the nation and the family. Like other postcolonial regions and nations, in the Middle East the nation and the family are deeply connected to colonial liberation—the family represents a national narrative of unity and futurity (Chatterjee 1993, 232). For example, the family serves as a symbol of the nation and marriage functions as the means to produce more national subjects (Abu Assab and Nasser Eddin 2018, 54). While in Western cultures such as Europe and the United States gender roles and gender deviance are used as the main factor of surveilling non-normative bodies, in

[1]By bringing attention to the complications of Arab sexualities, certain theorists might categorize homosexuality as a product of Western intervention. For further clarification on this argument see Joseph Massad's theoretical work *Desiring Arabs* (2007).

Iraqi culture same-sex relationships that do not end in marriage are considered taboo and illegal and often faced with violence and erasure when perceived a threat (ibid. 55).

With that said, how might queer narratives and bodies exists in Middle Eastern spaces when they face of such adversity and othering? While Edelman claims queerness can only ever disturb identities, queerness in the context of Arab literatures have the potential to stand on their own. In her essay "Queering narratives and narrating Queer: Colonial queer subjects in the Arab World" Nour Abu Assab (2017) points to the ways an analysis of queer Arab narratives might be used to decolonize the nation as well as the body while explaining how Queer Arab narratives deal with oppositional discourses. She explains that in order to translate queer narratives, one must consider the narrative and how it was, and is still used, to further colonial agendas. Therefore, she explains how the narrative can be used to decolonize the effects of colonialism and the types of surveillance described above. Abu Assab writes "Narratives are crucial to understanding colonial relations…Narratives of queerness have become associated with sexual minorities, and are used to police identity categories for LGBT individuals…A queering of translation narratives involves looking at [these] dominant narratives and their queer opposites in contextualized terms" (2017, 28). Here, Abu-Assab explains that to truly overcome colonial narratives, queerness must be read alongside dominant narratives—and contextualized. However, she points to a key component of the ways in which queerness might overwrite colonial narratives—queerness functions as *oppositional.* However, it is not enough to simply posit that queerness is oppositional. Similar to Edelman's definition of queerness, this notion assumes that queerness can only exist in *juxtaposition* to straightness.

Furthermore, if the reader is to understand Ramy's story—a story that only begins once queerness works as a form of othering—it is important to contextualize his position as somewhere outside/but within a patriarchal nation. Therefore, in order to

understand how queer Arab narratives overcome dominant narratives by disturbing and transforming them, Iraqi citizenship must be contextualized. Referring to the text for an example, Ramy reveals how justice in the form of religion and family is used to control and exclude queer Arabs from the nation resulting in the negation of his individuality and citizenship. In the second half of the first letter Ramy writes to Sheikh Ammar, Ramy describes how Iraqis are all the same, as well as locating the fallacies in such dominant narrative discourses:

> Do you really know our city, Baghdad, sir? Most people would try to find eloquent words to describe it. For me Baghdad is a city that has evaporated into tiny particles of filth. *We* often think our lives are ordinary. *We* often look down on the streets, crowded with our fathers going to work, our children going to school, and our mothers praying for our souls and taking care of our homes. Some say that Baghdad has changed since the war, but *I believe* that things are the same. *We* are the *same*. Everyone sees "justice" differently. (Namir 2015, 7, *Emphasis* added)

While Ramy claims that Baghdad hasn't changed since the Iraq War, he is unaware of his exclusion from the nation even if his language says otherwise. The US passed on its own practices of regulating the body in continuation of the nation via "reproduction and bodily control" (Abu-Assab & Nasser-Eddin 2018, 53). However, in this passage, Ramy also recognizes the limits/negation of his own national citizenship through oppositions as well as nationalism. Furthermore, he establishes his position within the nation. This passage contrasts with the first passage where Ramy is unwilling to divulge names or locations without first establishing a difference. Moreover, Ramy shifts the burden of queerness once more; he queers Baghdad. Again, Ramy shifts queerness away from himself and positions the nation as a queer construct.

Therefore, Ramy's life is dictated by oppositions established within the social norms of Iraqi culture. The cultural oppositions are not singular in nature, however, but pluralistic. Rami establishes the singular "Iraqi" through the signifying pluralistic pronoun "We." The collective "we" is made up of fathers, children, and mothers—each

of which make up the normative nuclear family. In the illustration that Ramy provides, a family consists of a father, a child(ren), and a mother. All the aspects of the family are irrevocably connected to Baghdad, as are the roles they play in representing the nation. If the family symbolizes the national norm it is explicitly tied to the nation represented by the capital city of Baghdad. Moreover, the negativity Ramy personifies through this description of Iraq is due mostly to the responsibilities that Ramy must shoulder when it comes to his own family. Ramy explains to Sheikh Ammar continuing his letter "Their [his brother Mohammed and his wife Noor] love was strong…marrying after their return to Iraq. My brother and his wife cannot conceive a child" (Namir 2015, 8). The inability of Ramy's brother to have children, shifts the future of his family onto Ramy—a future Mohammed is deeply invested in as he explains to Ramy "I [Mohammed] want to make Mama and Baba happy in their graves" (ibid., 17).

Ramy remains caught between two dichotomies: the future of his family and the future of his queerness. Because his queerness faces uncertainty, Ramy uses his narrative to shift queerness once again—questioning the validity of the family. Dispersed throughout this passage is a language of negativity, a language subtle, yet provocative, in who/what it categorizes. Moreover, attached to the norm is a negated language. Ramy sees Baghdad as a mixture of "Tiny particles of filth" and "ordinary lives." Such language reveals the nature of living on the outside, but still encompassed by the collective, a space that Ramy occupies. In the final lines of the passage, Ramy also establishes a caveat in which difference/opposition can be located within the norm. He states that "Everyone," not "We," "sees justice differently." Ramy uses the pronoun "Everyone" instead of "We" to imply that citizens can break the norms that seem to attain their power from normative national ways of being. This marks the first place where Ramy begins to disrupts the national, using "We" as the singular metaphor for

Iraq. Moreover, Ramy is working through moving beyond the essentialism of binaries established by Western narratives of control responsible for normative narratives.

Therefore, Ramy attempts to locate a position outside but within the nation through a narrative of his own design—he doesn't exactly oppose the nation, but he doesn't exactly see it as a positive addition to his own life. Queerness, once again, in Ramy's eyes represents the failure of the heteronormative individual to imagine alternative means of existence—he engages in a narrative of queer failure. Jack Halberstam, previously Judith Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), works on defining the spaces where queer bodies, or individuals, create counter discourses to the heterosexual/homosexual binary (87). He states—in regards to queer narratives—that "I tell it [the narrative of failure] also as a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, an art of unbecoming…The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (Halberstam 2011, 88). Here, Halberstam shows that failure is not just losing, instead failure functions as a means to search and look for other ways of living beyond the margins. In other words, Halberstam explains in this passage that there is power in imagining new alternatives of existence and embracing the negative connotations associated with excluded identities—finding power in the failure of living on the outside.

Therefore, a queer aesthetic is one that plays with failure and turns it into something else. It (the queer aesthetic of failure) "confuses" and in doing so questions the "systems" that designate certain queer bodies as examples of failure. Halberstam takes this a step further stating, "We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability

of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (ibid, 88). By questioning failure as indifference, Halberstam believes that failure can be used to reveal the fallacies embedded in ideologies that dominate discourses.

Therefore, Ramy's negation of the nation, and the heteronormativity he finds holding him prisoner due to the "close-minded repressive" people in Iraq, is the beginning of his own queer narrative that recognizes alternative futures beyond the family (Namir 2015, 8). It is markedly a representation of queer failure to imagine alternative means of existence. Ramy's queer imagination can be further clarified when he meets his second boyfriend, Sammy. Ramy first meets Sammy at school as Sammy is practicing the violin. During this scene, Sammy plays the song "My Heart Will Go On" by Céline Dion. While listening to Sammy play, Ramy "[imagines he] is Rose and Sammy is Jack…[*Titanic*] convinced me that I would rather die in the arms of a lover than die alone in a world that imprisons me in silence" (ibid., 65). Ramy transforms a popular heterosexual couple, Rose and Jack from *Titanic,* by transposing homosexuality onto heterosexuality through depicting himself and Sammy as Rose and Jack. Even though Rose and Jack are a non-normative couple who break class-based norms by being together, they are ultimately a doomed couple. However, Ramy believes fiction can provide visibility to social transgressions and creates possible alternatives to norms that may not exist in real life. Through his imagination, Ramy is able to subvert social norms inherent in his society—as well as Western cultural influences. Although it is a fundamentally flawed reimagination, he offers an alternative way outside of his imprisonment because he counters the normativity of heterosexuality. Again, Ramy's queer narrative shifts the perspective, subverting the norm.

While he might seem silenced, Ramy challenges his imprisonment within the heteronational when he discusses homosexuality and Islam with Ammar: "Sir, this is

my final question to you: why can't I be a devout Muslim and be true to myself at the same time?" (Namir 2015, 104). By asking this question, Ramy disrupts the singular view that non-normative identities are not able to be religious—he forgoes the singular "We" and instead invokes the personal "I." Secondly, by voicing an unspoken taboo—one cannot be Muslim and homosexual—Ramy imagines a new narrative different than the one that delegitimizes his existence; his narrative isn't exactly *oppositional* as it is an alternative. He questions the belief that Iraqi-Islamic citizenship relies on heteronormativity, supported by a single interpretation of Islam and opens a space for homosexuals through a language of possibilities. Instead, he no longer accepts that he must be Muslim and heterosexual in order to be considered Iraqi. Instead, he provides an alternative, a possibility; he can be Muslim and *homosexual* even if Iraq denies his homosexuality.

Through language and imagination, Ramy queers the national narrative of Iraq, but Ramy never fully establishes a collective outside of the nation. While his language reveals that there are possibilities and alternatives, he is never ever truly able to break outside the norms, only disrupt/push at them. In doing so, Ramy makes it possible for other homosexual Iraqi Muslims to create a collectivity through the visibility of his faith and homosexuality. For example, when Ramy's brother Mohammed approaches Ramy in order to arrange his marriage, he is unable to articulate to his brother that he will be unhappy in a heterosexual relationship. Mohammed shows Ramy a picture of Yassmine, a potential wife, and asks "What do you think?" to which Ramy responds in his head "I am thinking of another life, a different future, with someone else," but states out loud "She's nice" (Namir 2015, 37).

Once again, Ramy is caught within two oppositions: the heteronational and his desire to be queer—the latter of which is only a different future, a possibility, an utterance. Ramy's inability to make the imagined physical happens once again when

Mohammed drives him home from the mosque where the Sheikh has delivered a sermon on homosexuality. During the drive home, Mohammed asks Ramy if he is '*lotee*' (gay): "He turns and grabs my shirt collar. 'I need to know the truth. Are you…? God, I can't even say the word…. Are you *lotee*?' (Namir 2015, 52). Ramy states that he is not, but directly after he imagines an alternate conversation, "Mohammad is driving, and I feel uncomfortable as I sit beside him. He says, 'I want to know the truth.'…'What truth?' I finally ask. Are you *lotee*? He asks. 'Yes'… 'I've always known.' A moment of silence follows. He smiles, leans over, and kisses my cheek" (ibid., 52-53). These two passages show that he can only imagine a narrative future where homosexuality is known and visible for what it is; in imagining his brother articulate his homosexuality, Ramy lays the groundwork for change. Once again, Ramy connects his homosexuality to his faith through this reimagination of the situation in which his brother questions him. Ramy sees no harm in being both homosexual and Muslim. When Ramy reflects on alternative moments in his life that involve both his homosexuality and his faith, he is showing the possibilities for queer Arab spaces outside the nation.

II. Transformative Narratives: Queering the National Body

Although Ramy is unable to wholly establish his own place as a queer Iraqi, he still has agency to influence others through how he records and shifts his own queer narrative. Part of Ramy's inability to fully realize his own queer narrative is that he occupies a space between queerness and heterosexuality—he doesn't exist within the space of Islam. Therefore, in order for a Queer body to Transform the national story—it must do so from within a space of Islam and heterosexuality. Returning once again to the beginning of the text, Ramy shifts queerness onto a significant character—the Sheikh Ammar. Sheikh Ammar represents the norm because he is married, has a son, and leads

the mosque Ramy and his brother Mohammed visit in Iraq—he is the father in the allegory that Ramy establishes in the beginning of the novel. Sheik Ammar upholds the normativity that Ramy subverts and is eventually influenced by Ramy's queer imaginations. Through disturbing the Sheikh's narrative, Ramy influences Ammar's religious and social beliefs, and in turn, Ammar undergoes both a spiritual and sexual transformation—establishing a narrative of success over failure of the heterosexual body. Where Ramy is unable to fully subvert the normative belief that it is not possible to be both homosexual and Muslim, Ammar succeeds because he embodies the secular as well as the non-secular attributes of Iraqi society.

Therefore, the opening letter that Ramy shares with Ammar is significant because it begins the work of transforming the nation. In the first passage above, the structure of the novel is actually brought forth. The introduction is actually the first part in a series of letters that permeate the entirety of the novel. Additionally, Ramy exchanges these letters with Sheikh Ammar. Sheikh Ammar leads worship at the mosque Ramy attends with his brother Mohammed. However, while the letters Ramy writes function as a means of correspondence, the letters also function as a means of confession. Ramy's story is told alongside the letters he shares with Sheikh Ammar. Therefore, Ramy shifts the burden of queerness alongside his own narrative to a significant individual within the text as well as Arab culture; a leader of Islam. As stated before, Ramy uses a letter to confess his homosexuality and to correspond with Sheikh Ammar. José Quiroga in *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* explains how letters of correspondence erase the division between the public/private and the subjective/objective "Letters talk about the private life...[wherein] privacy is a spectacle…It [the letter] is the place where an individual becomes a subject and a subject becomes an 'author.' Correspondence, like homosexuality, beckons a play with liminal or marginal status, a play where readers

rescue pleasure given in the form of absence" (2000, 38). Therefore, the letter Ramy writes in the beginning of the novel creates a space to articulate that which prevents him from living a queer life—his exclusion from the religious half of his national identity.

For example, Ramy's letter drastically changes and influences Sheik Ammar—a process that begins with one little queer word. Towards the end of his first letter, Ramy asks Ammar for help by asking him to create a sermon that accepts homosexuality, a sermon in which he must use the singular word "werdy (pink)" (Namir 2015, 23). This is the culminating moment that begins the work inherent in disrupting the singular narrative of Iraqi life because "pink" in Arab culture carries a positive connotation (Al-Adaileh 2012, 4). Given the word pink and the form of Ramy's queer narrative (a letter of correspondence), Ramy shows that queer narratives are deeply invested in evoking what's left unsaid. Therefore, language is deeply connected to queer narrativity and queer futurity. Ammar's language, before he is influenced by Ramy, can be divided into two parts, the latter of which is an evolution/disruption of the former. At first, Sheikh Ammar is a devout follower of Islam and interprets it through linguistic norms based in heterosexuality and the formation of the nation. Like Ramy, he uses oppositions to lay out the frameworks of the single nation. After receiving Ramy's letter, Ammar delivers his first sermon on homosexuality: "I clear my throat yet again. 'Homosexuality is unlawful in Islam, my brothers and sisters. It is neither accepted by the state nor by Islamic society. The Qur'an clearly states that it is unjust, it is unnatural, a transgression and a crime. It's *haram. Haram*!'" (Namir 2015, 48). Ammar clearly articulates that the Islamic national allegory excludes homosexuality— "It is neither accepted by the *state* nor by *Islamic* society." By pointing to both the state and Islamic nation, Ammar reveals their conflation and how they both exclude homosexuality. If Ammar believes that

homosexuality is a "transgression" and a "crime," he also believes that it is a crime against the state (nation) and society (religion). But, homosexuality is a specific crime: "*Haram.*" Translated, Haram means "forbidden."

Although this lecture is the first place in which Ammar points to how homosexuality is a transgression against the nation, he uses national languages that uphold the norm when he describes his son Jaffar and the role he will fulfil when he becomes a man. After the angel Gabriel's visitation, and before he discusses homosexuality with Ramy, Ammar reinforces the singular nation when he describes his son:

> Jaffar is ten years old. I've followed in the family's footsteps and rejected institutionalized education for him. Like my father, I believe that the best education is through experience and the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet. Jaffar now a young *imam*, accompanies me to the mosque…and listens to my lecture…One day I hope that he will become a sheikh like me. I see in him a younger version of myself, wearing the white dishdashi and cap on his head. Of course. Jafar doesn't have facial hair, but he will. *Masha'Allah*…I like to call my son "man" because I want him to think he is one…When I look at him, I see the grown man he will become. (Namir 2015, 33)

Here, Ammar uses language that resonates with the nation that Ramy has established is the norm: family and masculinity. He explains that he has decided to forgo "institutionalized" education for Jaffar because his father had done the same for him. Ammar reproduces the vision Ramy has of Iraq, family and its connection to the nation. Amar chooses to follow in his father's footsteps, therefore, reproducing the heteronational. He also reveals that Jaffar is a "younger version" of himself, implying that he will grow up and be a "sheikh like [him]." Ammar expects Jaffar to be a father with a wife of his own—reinforcing Ramy's previous observations of Baghdad and Iraqi citizenship.

But, Ammar's understanding of citizenship is not simply reduced to the heteronational. He proves that Islam factors into the citizen-based equation. Ammar

equates being a man with "facial hair"—something Jaffar does not yet have. Following his wish that Jaffar will have facial hair, the epitome of masculinity, Ammar uses a religious euphemism declaring "*Masha'Allah*." The Arabic "*Masha'Allah"* translates to the English equivalent of "God willing." Inherent in this euphemism is the belief that God has a hand in everything. In this instance, Ammar believes that God will play a role in shaping Jaffar's masculinity, and subsequently, his place within the nation. Once again, this euphemism comes after Ammar's desire for Jaffar to be a man as God wills it. But following this line of thinking, Ammar believes that God plays a role in shaping Jaffar's manhood; God shapes every man's masculinity, not just his son's. Ammar explains that by calling his son Jaffar a "man," he will think he is one. Clearly, Ammar operates within heteronormative understandings of nationality that are directly reinforced by his interpretations of Islam. One cannot be understood without the other, but instead each works together to determine an Iraqi nationality based in both the secular (the belief that Arab traditions define hair as the epitome of masculinity) and non-secular (the belief that God wills all that takes place in a man's life.)

Undoubtedly, Ammar understands that language is the tool in which to reproduce normative frameworks—i.e. his use of the term "man" when he addresses his son Jaffar. Once again, in another passage, Ammar reveals the connections between Iraq and Islam as it is used to reinforce the heteronational. While Ammar only believes in oppositions, his position on Islam and homosexuality begins to resist the self he finds inherent in his faith and its connection to the nation. When he finally sits down to talk with Ramy, Ammar discovers that Ramy is a homosexual and that Ramy has written the letter asking him to deliver a sermon on homosexuality. After, Ammar and Ramy are soon embroiled in a debate about whether Islam acknowledges homosexuality and if there is a place for homosexuality within the Iraq-Islamic nation state. When Ramy declares that he was born homosexual and blames Ammar on behalf of the nation,

Ammar responds, "When a majority of people believes in similar ideology, it might have some truth to it" (Namir 2015, 103). Here, Ammar seems unsure of the singular nation bound up in his interpretation of Islamic ideology. He doesn't directly declare that it is true, but that it "might" be true. The truth presented here marks the partial evolution of Ammar's limited view of religion and its role in creating the nation.

Ammar's narrative begins take shape as a queer narrative in the second half of the novel. In fact, he begins break away from the norm through private and public performances. Jose Muñoz, in his work *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* explains that queer performances in such places are significant political rejections of the norm. Muñoz describes "disidentification" as the process in which one refuses to identify "or connect" with certain "cultural codes" (1999, 12). He states: "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect with the disidentifying subject…" (ibid.). What Muñoz means here is that "disidentification" is the process of "rejecting" the "norm" and creating a new identity through performance that recodes the individual. It means turning such positions into positions of power and harnessing the "energies" created by such "contradictions." In order to harness these energies, Muñoz proposes that those who do not fit these "narrow and rigid" existences, must embrace "Counter public performances [that] let us imagine models of social relations" (1999, 33).

When Amar begins to shift his cultural politics, he begins the work of disidentifying with the social and religious norms he has originally upheld. The first area he begins the work of writing his own queer narrative is through rewriting the codes of religious norms. Whereas Ramy was caught between two forces—queerness and straightness—Ammar is caught between differing spiritual forces—good and evil. In Biblical and Qur'anic theology, angels often intervene in the lives of men, allowing

God to influence man, but not directly. After Ammar reads the word "pink" in Ramy's letter two angels begin to visit him: the Angel Gabriel and the Angel Abaddon. Each angel is invested in a different outcome when it comes to Ammar's acceptance or rejection of homosexuality. While the Qur'an characterizes Gabriel as good and Abaddon as the angel of death—in the circumstance of the novel Abaddon works as the force that upholds the Qur'an as it is interpreted by society showing the contradictions inherent in his faith. While society, and in turn Abaddon, condemns homosexuality by interpreting it as "haram" and "sinful", Gabriel embraces it. While Ammar is deciding whether or not to give a sermon on homosexuality, Gabriel explains "to be a Sheik isn't just to lecture and pray and read the Qur'an. You have to help those who are in need" (Namir 2015, 25). Therefore, the codes of religion are switched. Gabriel shows that narrow interpretations of the Qur'an are sinful, not homosexuality itself. Furthermore, Ammar is changed by Gabriel's influence. This is best illustrated in a passage where he argues with the angels Gabriel and Abaddon. Gabriel asks Ammar if he is "going to let Abaddon control [him]" to which he responds "Of course not, I make my own decisions." (ibid., 108) This is a stark comparison to the beginning of the novel, where Ammar evokes *Masha'Allah*, what God wills, as a way to explain that God controls/intervenes in human life. If Ammar asserts that he makes his own decisions, he no longer follows what God wills, but instead what he himself wills. Once again, he begins to break away from the norms he vehemently upholds—showing that narrow interpretations of religion by society is fundamentally flawed.

Yet, despite his declaration, Gabriel is responsible for the dream that begins the process of Ammar's reconciliation of homosexuality and Islam. For example, Gabriel transports Ammar to a dream world of Sodom and Gomorrah in which he is subjected to a homosexual awakening:

> Suddenly, I am transported to a room I've never seen before, in the presence of a beautiful young man. His hands are tied to the bedposts, and he is naked. I try to back away but something pushes me toward him…The man says something in Hebrew…I realize he is one of the men of Lot…I look down; I am naked now too. I try to cover my genitals but my hands won't move. My penis is stirring; I try to calm it. Suddenly, I'm pressing against the young man and entering him; he whimpers. After a few thrusts, I feel the need to cum. I have never felt this before in my life, not even with Shams. I close my eyes, trying to steady my breathing. When I open them, I am back home with Gabriel hovering nearby. "Did you enjoy it?" he asks. "No!" Gabriel chuckles. "I know you did," he says. (2015, 109)

While this dream can be interpreted as a metaphor for rape, it should instead be read as a metaphor for the violent sexual awakening of Ammar's repressed homosexual self. Ammar's dream functions as a sexual awakening because he cannot reconcile homosexuality and Islam, nor can he reconcile homosexuality and Iraqi citizenship as denoted by the previous passages in which he only believes in the norms dictated by religious and national fundamentalisms. Therefore, Ammar can be read as the young man tied to the bed post; the rope is a metaphor for the limitations placed on his latent homosexuality. Subsequently, the young man is his repressed homosexuality confined, limited by nation-based citizenship. The rope is therefore the norms that bind Ammar's sexuality and imprison it within the Iraqi nation.

Moreover, Ammar reveals that he is finally in control of the sexuality that he has kept hidden, especially if the reader is to believe his declaration that he "makes his own decisions." Even though Ammar claims "he can't move," his body responds in a way that reads he is enjoying the sexual act of penetrating another male, even though he is anxious: "I try to calm it [his penis]" but "I feel the need to cum." (ibid. 109) Attached to this physical pleasure is an awakening, a stirring he cannot control. When he finally gives in to his own homosexuality and enters the young man, the young man's whimper is his homosexuality finally voicing what has been contained—reinforced by the fact that he does not understand the man when he speaks Hebrew. He

is finally able to understand homosexuality and explains that he has "never felt this way, even with Shams [his wife]" (ibid., 109) Therefore, Ammar is able to experience pleasure as well as the fear and shame attached to his repressed homosexuality.

Moreover, in this dream, he is also reimagining a single interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah that he previously uses to condemn homosexuality. In a previous passage, Gabriel questions whether Ammar knows the truth about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, to which Ammar responds "I know the truth. It's in the Qur'an," and Gabriel replies, "The truth is in the Qur'an, but it is ambiguous…I will show you the truth" (2015, 57). Gabriel reveals the truth of what happened and Ammar is transported to Sodom and Gomorrah where he witnesses the brutal rape of a boy by the men of Lot. After Ammar witnesses the violent rape of the boy that leaves "blood spilling from his backside," Gabriel tells Ammar that "God punished the people of Lot because of this incident. Don't ever forget it" leaving Ammar "confused and overwhelmed" (2015, 58-59). Ammar doesn't forget, and this experience crosses over into his own sexual awakening where he recognizes the man he is penetrating as a "man of Lot." Therefore, the second dream Ammar experiences becomes a disruption of the first dream, a rupture with the truth he is unable to acknowledge. There is no clear connection between his interpretation of Islam and homosexuality; there are only ambiguities.

Ammar's sexual awakening takes place in the form of an ambiguity, an imagined sexual awakening that changes his limited view of the nation—that one must be heterosexual and Muslim in order to be considered Iraqi. After this dream, Ammar's imagined homosexuality crosses the threshold of the imaginary and into the physical realm of his daily life. Ammar begins the work of establishing an imagined collectivity that becomes a physical manifestation as his homosexuality becomes a part of his everyday life. He begins the work of deconstructing the normativity that guides his

daily life, and the first place in the novel where this begins to happen is when his wife Sham visits his bedroom:

> She is sitting at her dressing table... "I thought I'd surprise you," Sham says with a smile…She nudges me towards bed…gets on top of me, her long red hair falling over my face as she kisses me again. I am sweating, my heart is racing, I feel inexplicably frightened, trapped. Shams moves my hand downward. I am not enjoying this. *I suddenly flash on the handsome young man and, before I know it, cum before entering her*. She climbs off me, looking disappointed. I know she wants me to give her pleasure. But I can't. I am a *failure* as a husband. (Namir 2015, 115-116, *Emphasis* added)

This passage takes place directly after Ammar's sexual awakening in Gabriel's rendition of the Sodom and Gomorrah dream. Moreover, the passage shows the ways in which Ammar begins to pull away from the heteronational norms that he vehemently stands by. Instead of upholding the heteronormative, he feels "frightened" and "trapped" by it. Sham, Ammar's wife, has come to his bedroom in order to have sex with him and during the process of foreplay Ammar realizes that he is "Not enjoying [it]." Directly after he voices his displeasure, Ammar imagines the "handsome young man" from his dream and "cums" before he is able to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife. Ammar unable to perform husbandly duties in order to give his wife "pleasure," declares that he is a "failure" as a husband. Therefore, his homosexuality overrides the success of his body as a heterosexual man. The normative binary is imploded, and he reverses the sexual discourses that define his life—he is *able* to cum when thinking about the young man, but *unable* to cum when he has sex with his wife. Failure is shifted to the narrative of heterosexuality. Once again, he turns to his religion to reaffirm his homosexuality because he returns to the previous dream in order to overcome the fear and dissatisfaction attached to the heterosexual intercourse Sham tries to initiate.

While in this passage Ammar considers himself a "failure" as a husband, this passage technically reads as an alternative narrative of success. For one, Ammar finally begins to understand the differences he upholds when condemning homosexuals. He begins to imagine his homosexuality through his heterosexuality and begins to recognize the possibilities of a different collectivity. For instance, directly after his failed attempt to have sex with his wife, Ammar decides to visit Ramy where he apologizes for his previous behavior:

> Ramy closes the living room door, then sits down across from me. "So, what do you want?" [Ramy asks]. "Ramy, I first want to apologize to you for my behavior the last time we met"… "I really wanted to help you, yet I couldn't," he [Ammar] tells me [Ramy]…." What is it, Sheikh Ammar? You came to talk to me, so go ahead." "I felt bad because I *dismissed* you so hastily. I didn't even take the time to consider a *possible solution* to your problem…" "Did I tell you I'm engaged now?" he [Ramy] says with a smirk. "You looking forward to your marriage?" "No, I'm only doing it to make Mohammed and Noor happy." "What would make you happy?"… "Going to America…I'd love to see the Statue of Liberty in person." "A statue is a statue. How can it give you freedom if it's just an object? You shouldn't depend on an object for freedom. You have to find freedom *within yourself*…" (2015, 126-127)

Here, Ammar finally recognizes the queer narrative Ramy uses in the beginning of the text. Ammar apologizes for not helping Ramy the first time, even going as far to say that he didn't consider a "possible solution" to his problem (reconciling his homosexuality and Islam). Secondly, Ammar shows his concern for Ramy's happiness. When he asks Ramy if marriage will make him happy, Ramy states that he is only trying to make Mohammed and Noor happy—Ramy would be happier visiting the Statue of Liberty in America. Even though Ramy believes happiness resides in the Western acceptance of homosexuality, Ammar pushes back stating that Ramy cannot place faith in objects. Instead, he tells Ramy he must find freedom within himself. Here, Ammar refers to freedom in a very specific way. While he is not openly telling Ramy

to be gay, he is telling Ramy to establish a space in Iraq, a space which he can be homosexual *and* Muslim.

Thus, he pushes against heterosexuality and its reinforcement of the nation. In doing, he deconstructs the secular and non-secular allegories that control his life to establish a place in Iraq where homosexual Muslims are possibilities. Ammar takes this even farther by initiating a homoerotic experience with Ramy before he leaves, "I stand up to shake hands with Sheikh Ammar; he suddenly kisses me on the cheek, mere millimeters from my lips. What just happened? 'I'm sorry,' he says and leaves the house quickly" (Namir 2015, 128). This passage highlights how Ammar begins to use the failure of homosexuality as a means to imagine other alternatives to heterosexuality and contrasts with the previous passage where he is unable to have sex with his wife. Yet, he is still unable to fully realize a homosexual Muslim collectivity. For instance, after he leaves, Ammar feels shame for erotically kissing Ramy and thinks to himself, "What have I done? Shame, shame on you…. I am a sheikh, a holy man, yet I am worse than a criminal. What is happening to me?" (Namir 2015, 129).

Once again, Ammar returns to the ambiguities between homosexuality and his role as a Muslim. He is a sheikh and the problem is exacerbated further. Therefore, when he returns home he is bedridden until another Sheikh comes to visit. During the visit, Ammar breaks away from his religious routes because he *thinks* he cannot be gay and Muslim: "'Brother Ammar, is something wrong?' His [Sheikh Jassem] voice is filled with concern… "Why haven't you been attending the mosque?' 'Because…I [Ammar] am retiring,' I blurt out" (Namir 2015, 134). Directly after this, Sham questions Ammar and asks how their family is going to live and he reflects, "that hasn't even crossed my mind. How is my family going to live?" (ibid., 135). In these two moments, Ammar breaks away from both the secular (his family/heterosexuality) and the non-secular (his role as a Sheikh) allegories that have defined his life, allegories

which he feels he is no longer a part of. Instead, his homosexuality finally takes over because he reflects that he doesn't even give his family a thought when he decides to retire. Even though the moment of his retirement seems bleak, and that Ammar has fully pulled away from his Islamic faith as well as the heteronational norms of Iraqi citizenship, eventually he comes fully into his homosexuality and religion. In the final dream sequence of the novel, Gabriel once again visits Ammar:

> While Shams is cooking dinner in the kitchen, I am back in my bedroom…I am starring at myself in the mirror when Gabriel appears again, fluttering near the ceiling. "What have you done to anger Abbadon?" he asks me. "I took your advice." "Oh and what was that?" "To be true to myself. Now come down here." I reach my arm out to him. Gabriel alights on it, and I hold him tight. Kissing him gently on the lips. When I open my eyes, he has transformed into the same handsome young man who visited me before. I turn around, and he kisses my back as he enters me. I feel as if I'm being born. He gives me everything that I need, and I feel complete. (Namir 2015, 141)

Here, Ammar fully realizes the imagination of life outside the nation; Ramy has helped create this space in pushing the boundaries between homosexuality and Islam. Where Ammar was the young man in the previous dream, Gabriel becomes the young man and reverses roles, sexually penetrating Ammar. Ammar makes love with his religion, and for the first time in the novel he finally feels "complete" because his religion allows him to experience a faith-based homosexual fulfillment. Ammar fully disidentifies with the nation and joins "in a moment, object, or subject" that he once rejected, bringing his transformation full circle.

Although this passage reconciles the discrepancies between his homosexuality and religion, it does not fully imagine the other half of his collectivity—his place in Iraq. Before Ramy visits Ammar for the final time, Ammar fully transforms into the imagined collectivity he previously tells Ramy to find. After fully shaving his face and applying lipstick and rouge, Ammar looks at himself in the mirror and states "I am *malikat jamal* Iraq" (Namir 2015, 149). Translated from Arabic, this statement means

"I am the beauty queen of Iraq." Ammar is fully transformed by queerness showing that his homosexuality and his citizenship are able to engage in a greater dialectic with his religion. Ultimately, Ammar reveals that is it possible to locate happiness within one's self, the lesson he tries to teach Ramy. Moreover, he embraces "a celebration of pleasures and of the intensification of bodily experiences" over the "ideal out self" [often categorized as] the road to freedom" (Dhawan 2013, 194)

While it might seem that queerness can never exist except through its opposition to heterosexuality and familial futures, this essay has attempted to ascertain the ways queer narratives might offer the possible means to decolonizing singular national identities. Furthermore, this essay has attempted to show the ways Namir's novel functions as both a queer narrative as well as a narrative that defines queer Arab identities by giving both voice and recognition to the problems that arise when queer narratives explore the intersections of sexuality, religion, and nation. Therefore, Namir successfully gives voice to a narrative that is often overshadowed by the complexities of nations, social norms, and the traditions of families, by demonstrating that it is the differences that unite others, even if those differences are only seen as disruptive, oppositional. Queerness, as Halberstam, Muñoz, and others have posited, becomes the process of imagining a body beyond such singular dichotomies.

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