

“TOMORROW SEX WILL BE GOOD AGAIN”.
EXPLORING SEX, SHAME AND THE OPTION OF QUEER
SEXUALITIES IN ALIFA RIFAAT’S *DISTANT VIEW OF A MINARET*

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Abstract. Sexuality has taken centre stage in most political and social discourses, as several laws are being passed and/or amended to respond to the call for an inclusivist approach to evolving sexualities. Previously shrouded in secrecy and considered verbal taboos, especially among women in African societies, sex and sexualities are now explored rather extensively by female writers and movie producers in contemporary Africa. Drawing on eclectic theoretical formulations, we explore the relationship between sex and shame and how it leads to the desire for queer identities using two short stories from Alifa Rifaat’s *Distant View of a Minaret*. The paper reveals that the subjugation of sexual freedom and sexual starvation of females constitute critical sites for the exploration of queer sexualities as alternative means of sexual agency and being. The paper makes a significant contribution to the literature and discussions on the intersection between postcolonial literature and sexuality studies.

Keywords: *Distant View of a Minaret*, sex, postcolonial shame, queer, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

As women, it is our duty to ourselves and our partners to get more vocal about asking for what we want in bed, as well as sharing what we don't. Neither partner can afford to be passive and just wait to see how far the other person will go.

(Rachel Kramer Bussel, *Beyond Yes or No: Consent as Sexual Process*)

In *The Will to Knowledge* - where he wrote "tomorrow sex will be good again" - Michel Foucault (1976) asserts that, in order to be liberated

from the repressive moralizing clutches of sex and violence, we must tell the truth about sexuality. For Foucault, sexuality must be devoid of pathologies, abnormalities and aberrations. In other words, sexuality must be free-styled with no form of conventions so that sexuality is not burdened with power dynamics. Foucault appears to suggest that rigid gender norms on how we think sex and sexuality should not be inherently segregatory but "that by saying yes to sex one says no to power". Similar to these claims, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault again observes that to talk about sex publicly is an act of transgression. This presupposes that discourses on sex and sexual art are regarded as intimate and private. So verbalizing sex becomes a taboo, particularly within the African sub-region. One important milestone of contemporary African women writers has been their ability to venture into serious discourses, dealing with the otherwise taboo issues in patriarchal Africa. This is evident in their continued depiction of deviant female characters who are no longer peripheral as far as issues of representation are concerned. Whilst there is significant literature on gender-based discrimination in marital relationships, sexualities, politics of sex, representations of sex and resistance in female-authored works (Bower, 2000; Buehler, 2011; Drougge, 1993; Marting 1988), the literature on Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* appears to be silent on the relationship between orgasmic pleasures, shame and how it provokes the desire for queer sexualities. Quite broadly, the commentary on Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* has tended to focus on the function of tropes and metaphors, resistance, the intersection between religion and feminism, voice and agency, corporeality and bodily representations (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990; Salti, 1991; Olive, 1996; Victor, 2009; Nkealah, 2008, 2009 & Mohammed, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is, thus, twofold: to examine Rifaat's pursuit in highlighting toxic sexual relationships in marriages, particularly within the ambits of Islam and how it leads to a desire for queer identities, but also to demonstrate how her short stories typify Foucault's assumptions in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*.

The paper will analyse two of her short stories: *Distant View of a Minaret* and *My World of the Unknown*. The analysis in this paper is guided by Foucault's notion of sexuality, the concept of postcolonial shame and insights from Spargo's queer theory. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part looks at sexualities as a continuum beginning with Foucault to Spargo. The second section discusses the quest for sexual freedom as a process of shaming within the postcolonial framework. The third section aims at interrogating how the denial of orgasmic desires constitutes a rejection of heterosexuality and, consequently, a desire for queer sexualities. The fourth section sums up the major arguments raised in this paper by way of a conclusion.

NARRATING SEXUALITIES: FOUCAULT AND THE QUEERS

Emerging in a period where discussions on sexuality and identity had taken the forefront in the social sciences, queer theory became a developing strand after lesbian and gay studies. Adapted and popularized by de Lauretis (1991), queer theory has come to encompass the study of sexualities that aim at questioning and toppling what may be described as the normal and thereby becoming "an open mesh of possibilities" within the discussions on sexuality. The notion of queer thus becomes a means of resistance towards the assumption that human sexual experiences are monolithic (Sedgwick, 1990: 110, Watson, 2005). Queer theory has been explained and developed by many scholars (*See* Butler, 1990; Halperin, 1995; Green, 2007). One popular definition, however, is what Spargo offers. He explains the notion of queer based on Halperin's (1995) insights. Spargo (1999) sees queer theory as:

Not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. The term describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images; analyses of the social and political power relations of

sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires (9).

Spargo (1999) echoes the popular notion and tenets of queer theory as a “free-floating performance which aims at deconstructing subjectivity and the oppression and categorization of sexual identities (Halperin, 2003; Green, 2002; 2007). Queer theory, however, has its methodological and conceptual basis in the works of Michel Foucault, whose singular, immense contribution to the study cannot be denied (Halperin, 1995; 2003; Watson, 2005). Writing on sex and sexuality and its usage in the subjectification of sexual desire, in his seminal paper *History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault pursues a question which serves as the framework for the establishment of the scholarly discussion on sex, sexuality and, by extension, queer theory: “How has “sexuality” been broadly conceived, how has sexuality been used in the service of the formation of the modern self” (Green,2007). By pursuing this question, Foucault interrogates the historical notion of sex as a taboo, a subject for the inner corners of the bedroom and “captured a form of human subjectification crystallized in the creation of the modern sexual subject” (Green,2007: 29). Despite finding its root in a Foucauldian philosophy of sexuality and vision of the “possibility of using homosexual identity as a potential point of departure for an emancipatory project by means of “homosexual asceticism” — a kind of “transformative practice of the self” — that would inspire new forms of intimate relations divested of their coding within the current modern sexual regime (Green, 2007: 29). Queer theory and sexuality, however, take these insights and develop them further as Green (2007) rightly asserts:

Paradoxically, then, queer theory inherits but disavows the Foucauldian analysis of the modern sexual subject—on the one hand, embracing the history of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*, and on the other, working sharply against the grain of its thesis to unearth rowdy, “under coded” “bodies and pleasures” that lie beyond the social order. Standing in vigilant defiance of epistemological and methodological approaches designed for discovering the

“truth” of the sexual self, queer theory “empties” social categories of their contents, thereby interrupting (in theory) their regulatory capacities. In this way, queer theory enters social theory as a torch bearer of Foucault’s utopian aspirations for de-subjectification (29).

Following Green’s argument, queer theory is inherently redemptive. It succeeds in moving away from a rigid regulatory sexual framework that permits only what is conventional. The queer theory allows the subject to redefine historical falsehoods about sexual subjects by de-emphasizing heterosexual norms and promoting self-styled sexual practices that have idiosyncratic value. For the analysis in the paper, the queer framework allows us to re-read sexual relations in the two short stories as characteristic of homoerotic desires and queer behaviours. We are interested in the ways in which failed sexual gratification constitutes sites for redemption and queer desires.

SEXUAL FREEDOM AS POSTCOLONIAL SHAME IN
DISTANT VIEW OF A MINARET

Alifa Rifaat’s *Distant View of a Minaret* tells the tale of a married Muslim lady who is intentionally deprived of sexual pleasure by her husband, who always “quickens the pace of his movements” anytime he senses the inner desire of his wife to continue the intercourse. This makes the protagonist resort to finding other means of self-pleasure (masturbation), which she gradually loses interest in as she yearns for satisfaction from her spouse. She gradually loses interest in copulating with her partner and does so in fulfilment of her conjugal duties. She consigns herself to fate till the death of her husband which astonishingly serves as a means of liberation as “she herself was surprised at how calm she was” (4). To be able to understand the effects of the denial and suppression of sexual freedom and how it leads to the disavowal of agency and the genesis of queerness in the case of the frustrated wife, and her quest for sexual pleasure, it is therefore necessary to pay crucial

attention to the ways in which shame is expressed and enacted in the short story.

Reading Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*, we observe an asymmetrical power relation in the sexual life of the unnamed character and her husband. Sex is used as a domineering tool and a means of exerting one's dominance. The unnamed character suffers from what we term 'sexual exclusion' and what Foucault terms 'verbal taboo', a situation of exclusion and alienation from the sexual act that ultimately oppresses her sexual desires and urges. These two means of sexual domination/slavery are challenged by the female victim, but she suffers shame which manifests itself in sexual passivity and self-blame. The narration begins with a description of sexual intercourse between a husband and wife, in an atmosphere where only one of the two participants of the sexual intercourse, the husband, plays the agentive role while the wife is only a silenced actor. The narration suggests that sexual exclusion is a frequent means of domination in the marital space of the unnamed character; 'As usual at such times she felt that he inhabited a world utterly different from hers, a world from which she had been excluded (1).

The unnamed character, realising that her sexual needs are compromised, decides to negotiate her sexuality with her husband. She is, however, challenged by the conventions of a patriarchal Islamic community. Even though not explicitly laid out in the text, these conventions succeed in silencing the female sexual partner whereas the male counterpart engages in solo sexual intercourse. The culture of silence (surrounding sexual intercourse) is explained by D'Almeida (1999) as the "historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status". Rifaat reiterates the problematics of silence as far as sexual satisfaction and gratification are concerned by placing her unnamed protagonist within a circle of equally sexually starved married women, who are only able to talk about *sexual ecstasy* in hushed terms" (p. 1). She appears to corroborate Bussel's concern about the need for women to be vociferous about what they want

in bed and how they want regardless of conformist ideals. She attempts to interrogate the convention of silence over sexual desires by showing how sexual exclusion and verbal taboos restrict and undermine the libidinal economy of women.

What appears to be Rifaat's contention is that the hush that characterizes sexual expression in the marital relationship succeeds in crippling female potential and, consequently, threatens the sexual sanity of women as social beings. Although we find the unnamed character's ability to defy the convention of silence by voicing her sexual desires, we find the reciprocal response of her husband the power dynamics that continue to frame sexual expression and sexualized behaviours. The resulting effect of the rejection of the unnamed character's quest for sexual freedom is the attendant shame she suffers for compelling her husband to remain inside of her by forcefully digging her fingernails into his back. The subject of shame in postcolonial contexts, particularly within the circles of female African writings, has gained prominence by virtue of the continued stereotyping of female bodies and the hegemony of structured relationships. While we acknowledge Bewes' seminal contributions to framing the notion of postcolonial shame, it is important to indicate that our conceptions of what constitutes shame, as far as the rhetorical strategies in Rifaat's short stories are concerned, are not restricted to an event or something that is intrinsic to narrating her craft. Our understanding of shame is encapsulated in the shame of women resulting from sexual exploitation, and the ethical implications of verbalizing such predicament. To quote Morgan (2008):

Shame is a complex state, emotional and evaluative and hence psychological and ethical at once. It is reflexive and yet social, requiring that we look at ourselves and at the way others view us, at once and dialectically. And while shame is akin to guilt, the two are not identical. We can be ashamed about what we have done, just as we can feel guilty for what we have done, but in such cases, shame is about who we are for having done what we did; we are ashamed for having been the one who did what we did. Guilt is related but different. We feel guilty for having done what we did but not for being who we are (14-15).

For Morgan, shame is reflexive of being beyond the other's expectation and in opposition to established norms. This suggests that shame has an intrinsic function of reproach – one that results from being otherwise than expected and, therefore, we should read the reaction of Rifaat's protagonist to her husband's rejection as an operation of shame. As Kaufman (1992:12) observes:

To live with shame is to feel alienated and defeated, never quite good enough to belong. And secretly we feel to blame. The deficiency lies within us alone. Shame is without parallel a sickness of the soul (12)

In Rifaat's novel, shame is conceptualized as sexual estrangement and being a woman. In other words, we find in the unnamed character's later reaction to her husband's death and her eventual passivity an effect of pleasure denied and a psychological toll of failed transgression akin to Nkealeah (2013) when she posits that:

The calmness with which the female character responds to 'the odour of death in the room' (4) may well be seen as an external manifestation of that internal code of acceptance that governs life with her husband. When her husband pulls away from her body and turns around to sleep, he fails to respond to the muezzin's call to afternoon prayers, and ironically his sleep becomes permanent, in which case his death can be read as poetic justice (33)

The narrator describes the unnamed character's alienation as:

Though he had made an indelible tattoo mark of shame deep inside her so that whenever she thought of the incident, she felt a flush coming to her face (p. 2).

The unnamed character is cowed into feeling guilty for making a legitimate and modest demand of her husband. Her husband plays the victim by subverting the blame to a woman who appears to be insatiable and has an unquenchable sexual thirst, always hungry and eager for more. And so, by assuming the victim status, the protagonist's husband succeeds in diverting guilt and shame.

Thenceforth she had submitted to her passive role, sometimes asking herself: "Perhaps it's me who's at fault. Perhaps I'm unreasonable in my demands and don't know how to react to him properly" (p. 2).

In her psychological warfare, the unnamed character blames herself for the discomfort she might have caused her husband in her quest for sexual pleasure. In her frustration, she resorts to self-stimulation as a means by which she can gratify her sexual desires despite the unconventional nature of her choice. The decision to masturbate is not simply an indication of her willingness to discontinue the suppression of her sexual desires and mitigate the possibility of infidelity. It is also arguably Rifaat's way of suggesting an alternative route to sexual freedom and female agency. It is important to note that the effect of the shame she suffers is that she comes to associate herself with two forms of sexual images: the Madonna and nymphomaniac images.

In her new passive role, the character is no longer interested in sexual activity and she finds no need to continue masturbating as she has assumed the mother (Madonna means mother figure) figure in the sexual intercourse and only seeks to satisfy her husband like a mother breastfeeding her baby. She therefore loses interest in lovemaking, thereby becoming a passive agent whose interest has been killed in a dull, boring cycle of sexual dominance, one-sided intercourse and, therefore, does nothing but "stare up at the ceiling, where she noticed a spider's web" (1). This act by the protagonist reiterates Tomskin's (1963) theorization of shame as "the inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment" (123).

According to Tomskin (1963), shame operates ordinarily after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and it inhibits one or the other or both" (123). The feeling of shame, therefore, kills or serves as a barrier to the protagonist's enjoyment of and participation in sexual intercourse. Her interest in sexual relationships is inhibited by the continued denial of sexual gratification and orgasmic pleasure, which ultimately makes her emerge as a dominated subject consigned to a sad and constricted fate. Her eventual passivity leads

to what Agamben refers to as “living death” (cited in Guenther, 2012). The feeling of shame also manifests in self-blame, as the unnamed character sees herself as a nympho: a woman who is always thinking about sex and is rarely satisfied. These two, passivity and self-blame, emphasise the shame of the unnamed character as a postcolonial subject in an unfair sexual union.

What Rifaat does in *Distant View of a Minaret*, as our argument has shown is twofold: that we should not read the story as a mere destruction of the social order, nor a rampant disruption of hegemony. Rather, we must consider her vision in this particular story as an attempt to intimate a tomorrow where thinking sex and women’s desires will no longer be regarded as unusual – particularly in the face of religious considerations. She advocates for a subtle defiance within the religious contract of marriage and move to flexible expressions within sexualities. Rifaat imagines a tomorrow where sex will be devoid of patriarchal strata and becomes an avenue for women’s emotional healing.

FORMING PACTS, REJECTING HETEROSEXUALITY:

“MY WORLD OF THE UNKNOWN” AND THE OPTION FOR QUEER SEXUALITY

My World of the Unknown tells the bizarre tale of a married Muslim woman who moves to a mysterious house with her husband, where she ventures into an unknown mystical world. The plot narrates the protagonist’s encounter with a spiritual being (*djinn*) who visits her in her state of “semi-sleep” (61) in the form of a snake, forming a bond with the former and taking her on a journey. The protagonist tours worlds beyond human imagination: unknown but existing worlds, as well as exploring sexual fantasies as she never had in her sex-starved marriage, which makes her view her bond with her spouse as dull in comparison. She is sadly made to sever ties with her partner, as her husband ignorantly kills a snake, breaking the pact in the process.

Owing to its provocative ways of communication and its unique idea of battling imposed heterosexuality, Rifaat's short story, *My World of the Unknown* has received considerable critical attention with scholars making attempts at resisting the temptation of reading the text within the queer framework partly because of the apparent contradiction between the author's religious background and the realities in the tale (Mitra, 2010; Abdo, 2012). In an attempt to justify this seeming contradiction, some early critics interpret the protagonist's experience purely on psychoanalytic grounds – claiming that the protagonist's experience is nothing but a dream or a fantasy suppressed within her (Davies, 1983; Othman, 1993; Nadje-AlAli, 1994; Li, 1999). Current readings of the story, have however made worthy attempts at looking at the homoerotic desire that the story summons and how these may serve as a form of Islamic feminist voice and agency (Mitra, 2010; Abdo, 2012). Particularly, Mitra (2010) looks at Islamic inclusive attitudes towards women and the growing openness of the subject of sexuality using Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt* and Alifa Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown*. Although he acknowledged differences in terms of how the two stories probe the interstices of faith to enable the recognition of female homoerotic desires (313), he suggests that Rifaat's story anticipates a world where there is no grudge against same-sex desires. Also, close to our critique in this paper is what Abdou (2012) observes when he argues that Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown* champions a lesbian affection between women. While these commentaries are insightful, there are still notable omissions in terms of how the stories intimate a connection between women's sexual stratification, queerness and the future of female sexualities.

The story begins with a narration by the protagonist, informing the reader of how she ventured into an unknown world, a world she terms "my world of love", an indication of her intense affection and emotion for this world - which she explores and beckons to its summons (61) - and how "she used to pass with an amazing speed between this tangible world of ours and other invisible worlds" (61). She, however, informs the reader of the genesis of her love and

survey into metaphysical realms, a confession which may leave the reader puzzled:

Love had its beginning when an order came through for my husband to be transferred to a quiet country town and, being too busy with his work, delegated to me the task of going to his town to choose suitable accommodation prior to his taking up the new appointment (61/2)

The protagonist draws the reader's attention to the state of her marital life; as one wherein her spouse is busy and therefore has little or not enough time for her and their life, to the extent that he delegates the search for a new home to the wife - apparently the genesis of her intimacy with the supernatural being. This revelation of her husband's unavailability then affects their marital life and, by extension, their sexual life and intimacy as a couple. As Victor (2012) observes, the protagonist is not far from a sex-starved wife who is burdened with the trouble of having to look forward to good sexual intercourse until the mediated pleasure is offered by the snake. What is revealing about the protagonist's sexual starvation is how Rifaat strategically connects the problematics of sex-starved marriages to the advent of queer desires. Rifaat exploits queer tools as a means to undo her protagonist's sexual repression and, by far, revive the emancipatory rhetoric in these desires. She appears to suggest that women's sexuality should no longer be policed and constrained by religion and patriarchy so that women do not continue to suffer disproportionately from sexual difficulties, pain and anxiety. Like the protagonist in *Distant View of a Minaret*, queer desires become convenient in breaking sexual bureaucracies and restoring the woman to having nuanced feelings as far as orgasmic frequencies and mediated intimacies are concerned. Rifaat appears to suggest that the woman's sexual pleasure should no longer be interpreted as "some secret wish" since it is an affirmation of the stereotype of women feeling unenthusiastic to request what they actually want in bed.

Rifaat envisions a good sexual relationship through the animating connection between the protagonist and the snake:

My gaze was attracted by something twisting and turning along the tip of a branch: bands of yellow and others of red, intermingling with bands of black, were creeping forward. It was a long, smooth tube, at its end a small striped head with two bright, wary eyes... The sight gripped me; I felt terror turning my blood cold and freezing my limbs. My senses were numbed, my soul intoxicated with a strange elation at the exciting beauty of the snake. I was rooted to the spot, wavering between two thoughts that contended in my mind at one and at the same time should I snatch up some implement from the kitchen and kill the snake, or should I enjoy the rare moment of beauty that had been afforded me? I kept watching it utterly entranced and captivated. Like a bashful virgin being lavished with compliments ... At last, I rose from my place, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was on the brink of a new world, a new destiny or rather if you wish, the threshold of a new love. (68/9)

The protagonist describes her dilemma as being caught between two worlds; one which is legitimate and bereft of sexual pleasure and one which affords sexual pleasure in unconventional forms. As she is caught between making attempts to kill the animal, she is beholding or continuing to admire the animal whose beauty had captivated her and held her in awe. Rifaat skilfully draws our attention to the ambivalent nature of orthodox sexualities and cautiously emphasizes the need for free-styled sexual expressions through the animated descriptions of terror and elation, exciting danger, numbness and intoxication and the captivation of the unknown of the protagonist. While Abdou (2012) argues that "the narrator's encounter with the *djinn* functions as a radical brand of Islamic feminism that challenges Arabo-Islamic cultural perceptions of sexuality as threatening"(398), we read the protagonist's enchantment with the snake as functioning initially as a process of recovering from the dark putative definitions of sexual stratification created by patriarchy and religion, and as an alternative framework of escaping hegemonic heteronormative definitions of sexualities. Indeed, while their (the protagonist and the snake) connections transcend orthodox sexual expressions, Rifaat's ultimate intention, as we argued, is to show how the deprivation of sexual satisfaction in marriage emerges as a site for rethinking queer sexualities. Rifaat clearly recognizes the possibility of sexual enchantments found

outside the boundaries of heterosexuality (Mitra, 2010) and this is manifested in the woman-to-woman connection between the protagonist and the female serpent. In recognizing her growing affection for the snake, the protagonist falls in "love" with the creature - a love which is a signification of homoerotic symptoms and queer delights; one which is not simply woman to woman, but woman to a she animal and a renunciation of heteronormativity. Although Rifaat exercises a little caution in the ways in which the protagonist pauses to assess her desires, she appears to be convinced about the redemptive role of queer expression given the effect the snake had had on the protagonist:

But how could I love a snake? And what is the secret of her beauty? I would ask myself. Was it that I was fascinated by her multi-coloured, supple body? Or was it that I had been dazzled by that intelligent, commanding way she had of looking at me? Or could it be that sleek way she had of gliding along, so excitingly dangerous, that had captivated me? Excitedly dangerous! No doubt it was thus excitement that had stirred my feelings and awakened my love, for did they not make films to excite and to frighten? (70)

Quite expected, the protagonist's self-assessment is beckoned by the regimental nature of religious norms and ethics and the binary mode of human closure, where a man is attracted to a woman and *vice versa* so that she feels apprehensive about this satisfying love that relieves her from her boring and detached marriage. Rifaat reconciles her protagonist's frustration through the mythological framework of Egyptian monarchism and the exalted image of Cleopatra.

And yet I fell to wondering how union could come about, how craving be quenched, the delights of the body be realized, between a woman and a snake. And did she, I wondered, love me and want me as I loved her? An idea would obtrude itself upon me sometimes: did Cleopatra, the very legend of love, have sexual intercourse with her serpent after having given up sleeping with men, having weird amorous adventures with them so that her sated instincts were no longer moved other than by bites from a snake? And the last of her lovers had been a viper that had destroyed her. (71)

Rifaat further strengthens the call for free-styled sexual expression by evoking Cleopatra's "frank sexuality" that "damns her" in critics' estimations. She appears to contend that sexual pleasure is not masculine – that it is inhabited in limitless but enthusiastic amorous conditions with a penetrator and a receiver. So sexual pleasure becomes barren of machoism as well as cultural and religious restrictions. The protagonist consequently enters into a pact with the snake, who "weds her, calls her "her bride" (73) and becomes the object of her total admiration. Again, by her reference to Cleopatra, the protagonist reifies the regularity of her desires as something that is normal and likely. She appears to justify her queer desires as allowed and agreeable despite the controversies surrounding her (Cleopatra) death. The narrator's love continues to grow and she waits in eager anticipation of the fateful visit of her lover. Her wishes are however fulfilled with the *djinn*-like snake visiting her and making love to her. She closes her eyes as she hears the rustling sound which heralds the approaching presence of her lover:

I lay back in submission to what was to be. No longer did I care whether love was coming from the world of reptiles or from that of the *djinn*, sovereigns of the world. Even were this love to mean my destruction, my desire for it was greater (72).

The narrator in her submission to the conquering presence of her lover accepts that she no longer cares about the source of the love. She acknowledges that she may not know whether her lover is a spirit as the Sheikh had informed her or was just an ordinary creature. The protagonist is ready to have an amorous affair with a snake; even before she comes to know of her gender as being her fellow woman. She finally makes love with her beloved, where she ultimately makes a pact, which results in the toppling that she earlier made with her earthly spouse:

I felt her cool and soft and smooth, her coldness producing a painful convulsion in my body and hurting me to the point of terror. I felt her as she

slipped between the covers, then her tiny two fangs, like two pearls, began to caress my body; arriving at my thighs, the golden tongue, like an arak twig, inserted its pronged tip between them and began sipping and exhaling; sipping the poisons of my desire and exhaling the nectar of my ecstasy, till my whole body tingled and started to shake in sharp, painful, rapturous spasms (73)

The excerpt above portrays the narrator's sexual affair with her lover (snake). In describing the scenery with vivid imagery, however, she does so in a dual epistemic sense: the portrayal of pain mingled with pleasure. In her narration of her sexual ecstasy, she informs the reader of the pain she encounters, which produces "a painful convulsion in her body" which grips her with terror, a feeling associated with snake bites and the sighting of snakes. This feeling, however, is interwoven with pleasure as she (the snake) inserts her "pronged tip" in her vagina, an indication of sexual intercourse. This imagery, here then, is a portrayal of a snake copulating with a human, a situation which renders their affair queer and odd within the narrator's ethical-political context and society. This passage, then, is a subtle echo of Cleopatra's affair with these venomous creatures, as their painful bites and stings bring her insurmountable pleasures.

CONCLUSION

What we have tried to do in this paper is to examine Rifaat's pursuit in highlighting toxic sexual relationships in marriages, particularly within the ambits of Islam, and how it leads to the desire for queer identities in two short stories. The paper has shown that Rifaat radically subverts female subjectivities through unconventional renditions of sexual freedom and sexual pleasure. The paper has also demonstrated that Rifaat attempts a redefinition of shame by providing justification for queer intimacies given the typical nature of sex-starved marriages in religious contexts. Our reading of *Distant View of a Minaret* is that the unnamed character's passivity in an oppression marriage is a result of the diverted guilt and shame

summoned by an irresponsible husband. We have demonstrated that in *My World of the Unknown*, the connection between sexual estrangement, queerness and the future of female sexualities is a provocative communication on the failures of heterosexual desires and an affirmation of the potential in homoeroticism.

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