

Homosexuality in egyptian film

Literature



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Images of same-sex love and sexual dissidence from the heterosexual norm have long been portrayed in literature, theater and cinema in the Arab world. While the explicit depiction of homosexual acts in film has been the subject of strict censorship, cinematic references to gays and lesbians abound, if often in heavily coded forms. The most ubiquitous coding for gay and lesbian cinematic imaging has been cross-dressing. While the tradition of transvestite performers in Arabia can be traced back to pre-Islamic times, 1 in Egypt transvestites gained added prominence in the 19th century when Muhammad 'Ali banned female dancers who were then replaced by khawalat-male dancers who dressed in women's clothing and performed at popular celebrations and other public venues. Costume and disguise go to the very essence of theater and film as media.

Transvestism-a cultural practice which codes gender dissidence often associated with homosexuality-in itself is often an expression of eroticism and sexuality. 2 Virtually all Egyptian films employing cross-dressing as a plot device do so within a comic context in order to introduce sexual, gender or social issues that would be deeply shocking if dealt with in a serious manner. Women as Men One of the earliest examples of an entire plot constructed around cross-dressing is *Bint al-basha al-mudir* (The Pasha Director's Daughter, 1938) directed by Ahmad Galal who also starred in the film along with his wife Mary Queeny and his wife's niece Asya.

Asya is forced to disguise herself as her brother Hikmat and must substitute for him in a job as a tutor on a wealthy estate in the Egyptian countryside. Most of the plot revolves around untangling misidentities so that all the main characters will end in appropriate heterosexual marriages. There are,

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however, long erotic diversions before the prescribed happy ending. Asya, as Hikmat, becomes a symbol of worldliness and sexual dissidence for members of a rich Pasha's household who lack experience outside the confines of provincial society. One of the estate owner's daughters, Badriya, becomes sexually attracted to Hikmat.

At one point, Badriya tries to seduce Hikmat by twirling a rose between her teeth and then dropping it to the ground so that Hikmat will be forced to stoop before her to recover it. Asya as Hikmat then tries to kiss Badriya. Interrupted by Badriya's older brother Tawfiq, the symbolic deflowering is stopped. A consummated lesbian act is prevented as well as any form of uncontrolled sexuality outside of marriage. Despite the conventional outcome, this scene is one of Arab cinema's most erotic portrayals of two women engaged in flirtation and seduction. Transvestism in the plot of *The Pasha Director's Daughter* was consistent with an elite heterosexual strategy to press for the right of romantic marriage based on erotic attraction instead of the arranged marriages still common in the upper classes in the 1930s.

In *The Pasha Director's Daughter* transvestism is coded lesbian eroticism. Asya, cross-dressed as Hikmat, dresses to pass and is not an obvious parody. The kissing scene between Hikmat and Badriya is not performed in a comic style, but in one of complete seriousness which heightens the erotic content. Despite scenes of same-sex eroticism coded by cross-dressing, it was to be understood by audiences that there were clear limits to erotic expression. Premarital sex was to be avoided; homosexuality was abhorrent. During the Nasser period in the 1960s, female transvestism often served a didactic function.

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Mobilization of social resources was seen as imperative for economic growth. This meant new work roles for women. Gender segregation and residual traditional attitudes towards women's activities outside the family domicile were seen as impediments to economic development. The regime promoted controlled entry of women into the public sector work force. Women dressed as men in film scenarios often provided ideological justification. In *Lil-Rigal Faqat* (For Men Only, 1964) director Mahmud Zul-Fiqar tackles the problem of the gender segregated workplace in a comedy starring Nadia Lutfi and Su'ad Husni.

At a state-owned oil company in Cairo, two women geologists are prevented from going on site to the Sinai in order to apply their skills in the "for men only" oil exploration project. None of the objections raised are convincing to the two geologists. Su'ad Husni as Salwa delivers an impassioned speech avowing that women can perform any kind of labor as well as men and often much better. When two male applicants for the Sinai position arrive at company headquarters, Salwa and Hind (Nadia Lutfi) take their credentials and head for the Sinai. Upon arrival, Salwa and Hind are immediately attracted to two drilling technicians, Fawzi and his friend Ahmad. They must then control their sexual attraction and continue to act as men.

Lil-Rigal Faqat has one of the few portrayals of gay social life to be found in Arab cinema. When the two women in male drag first arrive at the Sinai work camp, they are taken to the barracks' mess where all the men gather to dance cheek to cheek to Western romantic music. The setting has all the appearances of a gay nightclub. The inevitable problem arises of who is

going to lead (a little disguised reference to gay sex roles). Fawzi chooses Salwa as his dance partner.

In negotiating who will lead, Salwa in drag protests, "I'm a man." Fawzi easily consents to being the "woman" and taking the passive role. There are a series of unmasking of the two women. The first occurs when a Bedouin woman enters the barracks and, while making insistent sexual overtures to Salwa, is caught by a male relative with rifle in hand. Just as he is about to shoot, Salwa and Hind tear off their wigs and reveal their true gender.

Later, both Fawzi and Ahmad find women's clothing in the closets of Hind and Salwa as well as the two women's identification cards. The gender confusion is set right; everyone is paired in the appropriate heterosexual couple; and finally with everyone standing in awe in front of an oil rig, it gushes forth oil in commercial quantities in none too subtle symbolism. While transvestism as an economic strategy for women continued to be a theme in Egyptian cinema into the Sadat-era *infitah*, the link between cross-dressing and gender equality in the workplace began to recede. The popular quarter and the workers' barracks were forsaken for the drawing room of the new middle class created by the *infitah*.

Niyazi Mustafa, one of Egypt's most prolific directors, began directing in the 1930s. One of his most successful drag films was *Bint ismaha Mahmud* (A Daughter Named Mahmud) which came out in 1975. The main setting is the furniture business of a man whose only concern is to marry off his daughter once she has finished high school. His daughter represents the new generation of *infitah* women. She shuns the traditionalism of her father and

never goes out without wearing a miniskirt and a revealing top. In love with a young medical student, she herself has an exam score high enough to enter the business faculty of the university. When she rejects her father's choice for a marriage partner, her medical student boyfriend comes up with the idea of dressing her as a man and informing the gullible father that his daughter has had a sex change operation.

The sex change allows the daughter to enter the university and prevents the arranged marriage. The father is convinced that he now has a son, Mahmud. As Mahmud, the daughter has easy access to education and also takes over the family business which begins to profit as never before. The daughter's drag disguise is unraveled when it is suspected that "Mahmud" does not have an "ordinary male's" sexual drive. On three occasions Mahmud is caught kissing her boyfriend, causing general alarm that the sex change not only created a son out of a daughter, but also a homosexual out of a heterosexual.

The transvestite disguise is revealed finally during a double marriage ceremony concocted by the father for himself and his "son." There is general relief that Mahmud is once again his father's daughter and not a male homosexual. Her normative heterosexual behavior is rewarded by an on-the-spot marriage to the medical student. Men as Women Male drag queens have become stock characters in Arab cinema. In *Al-Anissa Hanafi* (Miss Hanafi, 1953) Isma'il Yasin institutionalized the role of drag queen. In this nationalist parable, a traditional baladi Hanafi is forced into an arranged marriage with his stepsister. At the point of consummating the marriage,

Hanafi is stricken with abdominal pains and is rushed to the hospital for an emergency operation that accidentally transforms him into a woman.

Hanafi then devises various strategies to wed his beloved—a butcher's assistant in a popular quarter of Cairo. He succeeds in the end and even gives birth to quadruplets before the official wedding ceremony. Yasin's drag is not meant to be erotic; it mainly consists of modified traditional women's dress with very little homosexual double meaning associated with the transvestite disguise. Cross-dressing here serves as a comic vehicle for introducing class issues and the cultural transition from traditionalism to a particular kind of nationalist modernity. In its elaboration of a gay subtext, the 1960 film *Sukkar Hanim* (Miss Sugar) marked a sharp departure from *Al-Anissa Hanafi*. Based on the Brandon Thomas play *Charley's Aunt* and its 1920 adaptation to the Egyptian silent screen as *An American Aunt*.³ *Sukkar Hanim* appeared one year after the popular American transvestite comedy *Some Like It Hot*, starring Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe.

The plot involves two cousins, Nabil and Farid, who have moved into an apartment next door to two other cousins, Layla and Salwa, with whom they immediately fall in love. Layla and Salwa are watched by Layla's father who tries to enforce strict gender segregation. An actor friend of the two men, Sukkar (note that "Sukkar" meaning "sugar" is also Marilyn Monroe's name in *Some Like It Hot*), is practicing for a stage role as a woman and must dress in women's clothing. He is accidentally caught in drag by Layla and Salwa.

Posing as a long lost aunt, *Sukkar Hanim*, who has lived in the Americas for the past 15 years, offers the pretext for the couples to associate without

patriarchal supervision. The middle-aged drag Sukkar Hanim is exempt from the sexual behavioral norms expected of the two younger women. As would be expected, the real Sukkar Hanim finally appears on the scene to expose the true identity of the drag queen, untangle the confused sexual orientations and give legitimate sanction to the marriages of the two couples.

While Sukkar Hanim makes the statement that to be modern is to replace traditional arranged marriages with unions based on romantic love and freedom of choice, the film replaces the de-eroticized image of Al-Anissa Hanafi with a provocative and overtly sexual drag. The drag character Sukkar Hanim not only facilitates happy heterosexual unions, she also symbolizes uncontrolled sexual passion and alternative sexualities. Beginning with Sukkar Hanim, drag comedies codify transvestism persistently, and sometimes explicitly, as tied to homosexuality. 'Abd Al-Mun'im Ibrahim's camp drag performance, with his feminized voice intonation and swishy mannerisms, is imitating and parodying stereotypical notions of feminine behavior as well as gay male behavior. It is no accident that Sukkar in drag becomes " tante," the French word for " auntie" and the same word that Arab gays often use among themselves as a form of humorous mutual recognition.

The film has a gay ending reminiscent of *Some Like It Hot*. In the last scene of the American film, when Lemmon pulls off his wig and declares he is a man, his intended fiancée remarks, " Nobody's perfect!" In *Sukkar Hanim*, when Layla's father is about to be wedded to Sukkar in drag and the real gender of the bride is disclosed, Layla's father is undeterred by the

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revelation that his intended marriage partner is a man and cries out, "I want to marry." In Sukkar Hanim modernity is achieved when sexuality transgresses the boundaries of marriage. The confusion of gender roles unleashes repressed sexuality. After directing two female drag films, in 1980 Niyazi Mustafa turned to male drag in *Adhkiya' lakin aghbiya'* (Clever but Stupid).

The film is short on plot and seems to have been an excuse for parading the popular comic star 'Adil Imam around in drag. The film has all the earmarks of an *infatih* social comedy. 'Adil Imam and a friend are poor students who cannot afford housing in Alexandria and do drag in order to be accepted into an all-women's boarding house operated by an obsessive peeping Tom. Economic necessity is the pretext for cross-dressing. Although the references to homosexuality are numerous, 'Adil Imam is a reluctant drag queen. He looks like a man wearing women's clothing and refuses to alter his voice intonation.

The lack of Imam's finesse accentuates the outer limits of erotic fantasy. 'Adil Imam had another run-in with confused sexual orientation in *Al-Irhab wa-Al-Kabab* (Terrorism and Kebab, 1992) when he follows a man who he assumes to be a government bureaucrat into the men's bathroom in the Cairo Arab League Building and instead finds a swishy queen waiting for quick sex in a bathroom stall.