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**Sleiman El Hajj**

*University of Gloucestershire*

## Between Validation and Emasculation: Paradox of the West as Architect of Queer Autonomy in Rabih Alameddine's *The Perv*

Given the infrequency of male homoerotic themes in the post-1995 Lebanese exilic novel in English, the first-time circulation of fiction by Rabih Alameddine (1959—), Lebanon's only openly gay writer to date, understandably created quite a stir in the literary, artistic, and social scenes of turn-of-the-century Lebanon. The political situation dominated almost exclusively by the Syrian military and intelligence forces to whom postwar Lebanon had been 'entrusted' instigated a new wave of censorship played out on different levels of cultural production (Traboulsi, 2007, pp.245, 246). Cultural outputs, such as documentaries, movies, novels, television shows, or even newspaper articles that went beyond nugatory or idle distractions, were perceived as a breach of the status quo and a threat to the postwar imaginary of national security (Seigneurie, 2011, pp.100, 215; Traboulsi, 2007). Gay in the middle of a raging civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990), the majority of the chief male characters in Alameddine's debut novel *Koolaid's: the Art of War* (1998) and his story collection

*The Perv* (1999) find themselves transposed overnight into an exile that, for most of them, proves long-lasting and becomes eventually their sanctuary, posited at an enabling distance from the brazen stranglehold of the fatherland.

Public morality in the Arab world is experiencing an identity crisis of sorts. The Arab public code of ethics to which Lebanon is careful to adhere to has 'deeply evolved since the colonial confrontation with the West' (Lagrange, 2000, p.190). However, it remains riddled with ambivalence when it comes to tolerance of alternative sexual preferences. As Jared McCormick (2006) explains in 'Transition Beirut: Gay Identities, Lived Realities', homosexuality in Alameddine's fatherland is still a largely proscribed topic despite the thriving gay social scene in Lebanon and the 'perceptible increase in gay men who are not only openly gay but also defend their lifestyle with more audible voice' (p.174). Hence, with the Taef Agreement ending the protracted paroxysms of the Lebanese Civil War, the prevalent post-war mentality, which allowed a tentative (and tacit) exploration of sexual boundaries firmly repressed during combat, remains staunchly patriarchal. The social masquerade of tolerance is thus premised on a power asymmetry – the subordination of homosexual visibility to the hetero-normative requirements of the status quo.

Recent studies reveal that since patriarchy in Lebanon invites and maintains a strong ethos of compulsory heterosexuality, Lebanese society remains hostile to the notion of an openly gay lifestyle (Merabet, 2006; Moussawi, 2008). Despite the country's less inhibitive socio-cultural positioning in comparison to other Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan where homosexuality is still punishable by death under Islamic *shari'a* law, acceptance of gays in Lebanon is congruent with a passive aesthetic of invisibility. The full-fledged 'formation of identity-based sexual communities' cannot, as Seidman (2012) notes, be assumed in Beirut, the same way they can in other cities such as New York and London (p.20). In fact, Moussawi (2012) argues that contemporary travelogues marketing Beirut as a gay-friendly destination allegorize the coercion of Lebanese men's 'dispositions and sexual identifications' whereby 'they are described as both discreet in public and sexually open in private' (p.868). Many practicing queers are compelled to obscure their sexual preferences by leading covert lives, particularly in relation to their fathers, the

family patriarchs who are kept uninformed of their sons' non-heterosexuality (Khalaf, 2012, p.190). This monolithic interpretation of masculinity foisted upon the queer community has been met with literary representations that reflect this condition in Lebanon and the wider sphere of the Arab Middle East in which it is culturally and geographically inscribed.

In the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, two main studies have focused specifically on representations of men as gendered subjects in Arab fiction, mainly in the literatures of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. *Imagined Masculinities* (2000) is a collection of essays on Arab male identity. Frederic Lagrange, one of the writers therein, argues that modern Arabic literature affirms a hetero-normative ontology of male identity by presenting queer men at best as tolerated subordinates in service of their heterosexual counterparts. Clearly, this predicament approximates that of conforming women in patriarchy. In a similar fashion, Samira Aghacy's *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967* (2009) explores patriarchal masculinity's functions as a form of 'male power,' a term she appropriates from R. W. Connell to show how patriarchy 'naturalizes hierarchy and domination' through acts that may involve or extend to violence (pp.1, p.17).

Accordingly, patriarchy premised on male heterosexuality is perpetuated by 'the subjection of women and subordinate males', namely sick, old or disabled men, and men such as 'androgynous subalterns', easily clued as queer (Aghacy, 2009, p.17). Not surprisingly, Alameddine's exiled characters in his debut fiction return to their closets when back in the dominions of the Lebanese fatherland; tellingly, many of them lose contact with their families once news of their homosexuality starts emerging. This is Mohammad's case in *Koolaid's* as he learns from the maid that he is never to call back home. Likewise, in *The Perv*, Roy in 'My Grandmother, the Grandmaster' and the Syrian protagonist Jim in 'Duck' are shunned in varying degrees by their families.

In Jim's case, the stigma is exacerbated by the fact that he is dying of AIDS, which he has contracted through homosexual contact. In any case, the patriarchal expectation of conformity is unshakable and dictates the precarious double lives

Alameddine's protagonists find themselves leading. A visible collusion, then, with the 'deceptive politics of normal mimicry' (Merabet, 2006, p.233) is the slippery slope brokered by the families of non-heterosexuals as an acceptable reprieve to nonconformity. In his book *Deadly Identities*, Paris-based Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf argues against such a unified vision of identity, writing that 'identity cannot be compartmentalized; it cannot be split in halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries' (p.23). That is precisely what is demanded by the families of exiled homosexuals who were fortunate enough not to be completely shunned by friends and family in the fatherland. In *The Perv's* 'A Flight to Paris', this is the case with the unnamed gay man whose mother complains about to the complete stranger, Jerry, a middle-aged homosexual flying on the same plane as the mother herself. She vociferates on the family misfortune and her expectations of her son's gay identity. The woman asserts:

You can sleep with whomever you want. But do you have to be blatant about it? I told him the first time he told me he was gay. I said it's okay. Lots of people are. Lots of great people. They don't advertise it. You can get married, have a nice family, and do whatever you want discreetly. Of course he doesn't listen to me. Not only does he live a gay lifestyle, as he calls it, but he writes a book. He wants the whole world to know (p.170).

Consequently, critics and literary scholars, such as Syrine Hout, Andreas Pflitsch, and Steven Salaita have extolled Alameddine's fictions, namely *Koolaid's* and *The Perv*, for their enabling narrative engagement with the homo-politics of Lebanese and Arab diaspora. They read these texts as embodiments of a queer perspective that questions hetero-normative boundaries by revisiting the construction of an exclusionary Lebanese identity, queried from a distance through the safety net the West as sanctuary has provided for both Alameddine (a self-proclaimed 'errant non-conformist' [*Koolaid's*, viii]) and his characters. Hout (2012), a leading scholar of Lebanese and Middle Eastern fiction in English, writes that Alameddine's gay characters receive acceptance of their sexual identities in the West, which becomes 'a comfortable place for a diasporic existence, if not the [characters'] only viable home(land)' (p.60). Hout's views generally find echo in Pflitsch's, even as he acknowledges that the 'cultural diversity' Alameddine's characters experience in exile

can instigate feelings of inner conflict, ‘maybe even schizophrenia’ (p.277). In a similar fashion, Salaita argues that Alameddine’s fiction subverts mainstream discourses about homosexuality (2007, p.80) and that the very notion of boundaries, social, ethnic, or cultural, is ‘anathema to Alameddine’ (2011, p.45).

Hence, while the merits of the West as a validator of queer identity in Alameddine’s fiction have been chanted repeatedly, the vicissitudes of the exilic experience have not been extensively probed in relation to issues of emasculation in the diaspora. In reference to key episodes in *The Perv* – especially the title story itself as well as ‘The Changing Room’ – I posit that the gay exile’s relationship with the West as sanctuary is paradoxical because it embodies the provocative antinomy of empowerment as freedom and of emasculation as otherness. These contending topoi are transposed in the stories to the hetero-normative Lebanese mainstream that castigates, and may avail to abuse, non-closeted queers and supposedly nonconforming women as others. It is noteworthy that the entirety of Alameddine’s literary output to date has been penned in English, and not only out of a desire ‘to be part of the Anglophone cosmopolis’ (qtd. in Nash, 2007, p.28). English as the writer’s language of preference, even if in retrospect clearly implied by his Western education, suggests that Alameddine’s freedom of speech, his earnest and direct approach to his non-conformist sexual preferences and to those of his narrators, as well as his lucid portrayals of sexuality in general, cannot be conveyed by his mother tongue, which as a product of the fatherland, becomes necessarily inadequate. The intercultural and inter-textual geography of otherness in *The Perv* is then the fulcrum upon which Alameddine’s usage of strong, almost pornographic language is predicated. Thus, his graphic portrayals of subordination are effected by the coercive sexuality into which the encounter with the gendered and/or queered other has been displaced. I also qualify Alameddine’s depictions of sexual encounters as not entirely constrained by abusive sexualized responses to gendered and queered subordinates, even if explicit counter-narratives of queer male desire reclaimed through visibility are not the salient focus in *The Perv* per se.

Ironically, it is not the modern Arab world or the Middle East that has been perennially homophobic and critical of homosexual identities, as evidenced by the hostile attitudes of the exiles' families back in the fatherland. Assad Abu Khalil, who has conducted research on homosexuality in the Arab Middle East, writes that 'the advent of westernisation in the Middle East brought with it various elements of *Western ideologies of hostility*, like [...] homophobia. This is not to say that there were not anti-homosexual [...] elements in Arab history, but these elements never constituted an ideology of hostility as such' (qtd. in Massad, 2002, p.369, italics mine). Alameddine suggests that not only homophobia but also other derogatory attitudes towards homosexuals of different colour or nationality seem to be rooted in the West in spite of its more redemptive characteristic as an enabling sanctuary serving as the alternative home the fatherland has disbarred.

In *The Perv*, this is illustrated in both the opening story and in 'The Changing Room'. In 'The Changing Room', the narrator, gay and Lebanese, studies at a boarding school in England where Arab boys are referred to as 'wogs' whereby 'queer wogs' becomes, ultimately, the worst kind of humiliation. Read in this critical light, Alameddine's fiction intimates that the West exacerbates the already oppressive patriarchal conservativeness of the fatherland by equipping it with the exported virulence of anti-queer sentiment, and, in doing so, relocates the shock of the encounter with the West into the arena of coercive sexuality – the plight of the gay thirteen-year-old Cyrus is a case in point. Early on in the story, Alameddine establishes through his narrator that Cyrus is a homosexual – 'I knew he liked boys, just like me' (p.70) – and indicates the exhortation to please, which Cyrus has acquired to ingratiate himself with any subordinating patriarch, be it his father or the English student prefects, as a portent of his downfall. Gay Cyrus is ordered to fellate Brattleby, an older student. In retrospect, Brattleby is considered sufficiently wily to receive sexual gratification from a 'queer wog' who subsequently hangs himself in the titular changing room to avoid the shame of confronting his ultimate patriarch, his father.

This move from the shock of the cultural to the 'infringement' of the sexual is painfully inevitable and proves the traumatic nature of cultural collision because of

its irrevocable impact on one of the most intimate elements of a gay person's life, the relationship to the body and to sexuality. In 'The Changing Room,' both the narrator and the Persian student-boy-toy find themselves in exile by parental default. Neither has made the choice to spend time in England even though, for Cyrus, England is not a temporary site of banishment from the fatherland but rather 'a step in the right direction' (Alameddine, 1999, p.76), however illusive, toward becoming a world-class engineer. The queer narrator here is the antithesis of the obsequious, voiceless Cyrus. Sensitised to the shock of the cultural encounter with the 'West' or with England as a microcosm of the West (pp.64-65), he externalises his personal trauma as a queer-identified 'wog' by assertively putting in their place wog-dissidents, for instance the lascivious 'slag who likes to fuck young [English] boys' (p.73) and the upper-class 'twit called Brattleby' (p.77) who ultimately causes Cyrus's downfall and then taunts the narrator barely two days after Cyrus's suicide, while reciprocating the same vicious and/or violent language these characters have initially used to mark the inferiority of the incoming exiles. At this moment, the narrator's masculinity as a queer wog is validated by his violent encounter with his counterpart, queer Cyrus's tormentor (and in a sense executioner), the almost pathologically callous Brattleby.

The legacy of vulnerability impinged on the psyches of Alameddine's exiled protagonists by the socially programmed constraints of the homophobic fatherland runs skin-deep in his fiction to the extent that, even on the metaphorical level of sexuality, the Middle Eastern homosexual in exile, be it by parental default or personal choice, becomes at times the victim of the Western phallus. Cyrus, unlike the more resilient narrator of his tragedy, sublimates the shock of his first-time encounter with the West into a puerile fascination with the ostensibly infinite possibilities of improvement, both educational and social, subsumed by a temporary (in his case terminal) exilic experience in England. Alameddine writes that Cyrus literally maintains an almost suicidally positive outlook on his new life at Milfield where he would ideally 'learn more than just schoolwork' (Alameddine, 1999, p.76). In his attempt to impress his father, yet another patriarch whose unassailable authority dictated that his son be stripped of any familial or social networks of

support in order to be fully 'immersed in English culture' (p.76), Cyrus sublimates feelings of trauma and abuse by a sense of discipline acquisition and a 'successful attitude' supposedly fostered by Milfield. Domination and submission here are symbolised through sexuality, and Alameddine describes the latter's effect in its pathological dimensions. Therefore, the Middle Eastern male, Persian as his author would have him be, is both symbolically and physically abused by the West.

That Alameddine entitles Cyrus's story 'The Changing Room' is significant. He thus posits that while the West might function as a sanctuary – even if a transient one, the case with this story's narrator who is sent to England to escape the vicissitudes of the internecine war in Lebanon – it can also acquire the sinister qualities of the emasculator through the inferiority imputed on the exiles themselves. England, and the Western world it belongs to, become the changing room where exiles are required to acquiesce to the rules and expectations prescribed by the newfound 'sanctuary'. When Cyrus crosses the thin line between conformity (bending to the wills of his English tormenters) and non-conformity (performing fellatio upon a prefect's command), he fails the challenge of surviving the trials and tribulations of the 'changing room'. The latter proves Cyrus's ineligibility for receiving breathing room or space, be it for character growth or development of a stable gay identity, and thus quickly becomes the hanging room, with the ingenious deletion of merely one letter.

In 'The Perv', which spearheads Alameddine's short story collection, a comparable derogatory attitude toward foreigners is voiced by one of the fictitious narrators posing as a gay teenager and admitting that 'for most pedophiles, fucking a foreigner seems to be more acceptable. You know, American kids are so immature. We foreign kids have a more accepting attitude toward sex. We foreign kids look forward to getting fucked by fat old men' (Alameddine, 1999, p.47). Here too the author repeatedly, even if not frequently, acknowledges this metaphorical phallic subordination of Middle Eastern, and by association, Lebanese queers, embodied in the twisted paradox of the validating yet emasculating power relationship with the West. Indeed, he seems to suggest that this outcome is a necessary evil that has been inculcated in the psyches of his gay Lebanese protagonists as an always-already state,

catalyzed by the advent of colonialism and Western capitalism in the Middle East in general and especially in the Arab world. While these currents have obviously transformed most aspects of daily life, efforts to impose a self-proclaimed 'liberal' lifestyle on Arab men have succeeded among only the upper classes and the increasingly Westernised middle classes (Massad, 2002, p.372), precisely because these wealthier segments of society could indulge in or adopt the lifestyles suggested by the West.

Alameddine's debut fiction presents exiled narrators who admit this so-called 'European complex,' a mimetic directive that is arguably a precursor for the paradoxical subordination exacted by the exilic experience. Mohammad, possibly Alameddine's autobiographical parallel in *Koolaid's*, says:

We all had what some would call a European complex. We wanted so hard to be European. This manifested itself in a couple of ways. There were those who mimicked everything European. They ate European, dressed European, watched European movies. It was a sign of sophistication if one intermixed difficult English words with the predominant French [...] [They] even developed a relationship to America similar to what the Europeans have, an unhealthy fascination mixed with simultaneous disdain (p.28).

Later, in *The Perv's* examined 'The Changing Room,' the narrator who remains nameless throughout the story even after he acquires strength and voice after managing to reclaim and redefine both parts of his assigned label 'queer wog', writes about his own European complex and his fascination with Western culture while growing up in Lebanon: 'Like many Lebanese boys, I grew up thinking of myself as European [...] I did not want to write how a doghouse in the mountains of Lebanon was better than a villa in Monte Carlo [...] I couldn't imagine listening to Arabic music, so I grew up with English bands' (p.66). Ironically, this fascination, the narrator soon discovers, is short-lived and is not necessarily reciprocated by the West where racism and bigotry, at least in the England Alameddine describes, run high. To this effect, the narrator writes that he 'moved from a war zone directly into hell'

(p.64), insinuating that even the outwardly least bigoted of the 'Western' people, namely Miss Collins his English teacher, is bigoted at heart and is thus pleasantly surprised by the narrator's outstanding mastery of the English language. Alameddine's fiction discerns bigotry as a precursor of emasculation, hence Brattleby's lack of remorse at sexually subjugating 'a wog'. The boundaries of English culture, and by implication, Western culture, albeit less emasculating than its English component, if the narrator's relative 'prosperity' in the U.S. is any indicator, are thus queried in creative narrative.

Alameddine's 'The Changing Room' is not the only story in *The Perv* in which the encounter with the West, or with a trend or lifestyle associated with the West, is dislodged by or displaced into the arena of sexuality. Other narratives in the collection, and in Alameddine's subsequent writings, explore how the hetero-normative configuration that shapes and cushions abusive masculinities in the Lebanese fatherland matches the similarly illiberal treatment of the fatherland's queer(ed) exiles in the West. The violence associated with this displacement, or more accurately, patriarchal aggression that demands its right for rapture, comes out through the character of Akram in the short story 'Whore'. Just because he assumes his sister-in-law Rana is promiscuous based on the rumours surrounding her alleged lesbianism, clearly a Western 'lifestyle' as perceived by her bucolic Druze compatriots, he gives himself the right to use her for his own pleasures, abusing her vulnerability brought about by a state of numbness and confusion following the mass hysteria prevailing over her father's funeral. The bitter irony of the matter turns out to be that the so-called 'whore' had never even been with a man. In both contexts therefore, in the fatherland and in exile, a 'phallogocentric model' for constructing and asserting masculinity is deployed in what bell hooks (1992) argues is a most 'accessible way to assert masculine status' by 'what the male does with his penis' (p.94).

Furthermore, the graphic description of Akram's sexual encounter with his artistic sister-in-law, Alameddine's casual depiction of the abuse heaped by Brattleby on Cyrus, and his generally detailed portrayals of sexuality in *The Perv* call into question his usage of what Anglophone literary critics of the modern 'Arabic' novel as well as some of Alameddine's readers have interpreted as pornographic terminology.

Frédéric Lagrange (2000), in his essay on homosexual encounters in contemporary literature by writers of Arab origins, echoes Alameddine's perhaps more subtle evocation of the West's emasculation of its male exiles. He purports that the loss of faith in the present, induced by a variety of social, cultural, and political factors, has gone so far in the novel of the 90s, be it exilic or not, that numerous Arab characters in fiction have become metaphorically victimised by the Western phallus (p.189).

Stephen Guth (1995), discussing the increasing frequency of sexual passages in contemporary Arabic literature, namely in Egyptian novels, goes further than Lagrange in his analysis of graphic representations of phallic subjugation and power dynamics. He observes that 'the taboos which are broken, however, are only aesthetic taboos, taboos on a linguistic level', adding that the discursive representation of sexuality does not aim at 'calling for a system of ethical values which is really new' (p.189). In his essay 'Sexuality, Fantasy and Violence in Lebanon's Postwar Novel', Maher Jarrar (2006) also examines whether eroticism can be differentiated from pornography in literature, but although he queries whether experimentation with literary form can 'give license to a vulgar language' that describes aberrant manifestations of sexuality, he acknowledges that so-called pornography serves a purpose 'to awaken, to usher in a sense of reality' (p.286) by probing subjects untitled in traditional Lebanese narratives: child molestation, rape, and homosexuality. On the contrary, Guth indicates that in terms of traditional sexual mores, even the 'pornographic' passages in postmodern Arab fiction re-entrench, but do not critique, notions of patriarchy.

Guth's statement is repudiated by the satirical backdrop of Alameddine's narratives, precisely in the graphic scenes in which sexualised abuse is enacted on either the male (Cyrus) or female (Rana in *The Perv* and Sarah Nour El-Din in *I, the Divine*) body. Both inside and outside the fatherland as a conformist home, the machinations of otherness these texts deride are a shaper of lives, livelihoods, and personal destinies. The traditional patriarchal morality so closely attached to the polity of otherness is revealed by Alameddine's writings to consistently permeate dual

contexts of peace and war in modern-day Lebanon, and the checkered times and spaces in between (Alameddine, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2008, 2013). This polity is questioned and radicalised to such an extreme that the venom of patriarchy becomes almost indigestible, even to jaded readers. The allegedly ‘pornographic’ depiction of Nour El-Din’s rape by three men of different generations, for instance, is thus meant to expose the reader firsthand through the protagonist’s own eyes to the crippling impact of patriarchy, which has pervasively shaped Alameddine’s literary output in more ways than we can imagine. Inviting his reader to align his field of vision with his protagonist’s and gaze helplessly at the eye of the oppressor, Alameddine (2001) stipulates that ‘what [Sarah] saw [in her rapists’ eyes] froze her’ (p.195). Much like the uninhibited masculine desire which moved *The Perv’s* Brattleby and Akram to unleash their sexuality on their victims, what *I, the Divine’s* Sarah ‘saw’ was the wildly and widely patriarchal ‘primitive desire, dominance, aggression’ (p.195).

Even as it is only within the formidable and cloistered context constructed by patriarchy that Guth’s statement is valid, Alameddine’s ostensibly pornographic depictions of sexuality as a form of satire is not confined to sex that is abusive, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and cultural context. The applicability of Guth’s observation regarding the implications of the pornographic element inscribed in contemporary Middle Eastern literature stops at the patriarchal boundaries, duly collapsed by the subversion embodied by the multiple representations of gay physicality in other works of fiction by Alameddine, such as *Koolaid’s*. The narrative inclusion of this kind of unmitigated sexual references, easily perceived as carrying pornographic intentionality, does not necessarily aim at arousing the reader. Rather, it is a distinctly overt form of validating gay male sexuality within the restrictive socio-political context of the fatherland his writings aim to destabilise. Lagrange (2000) argues that contemporary Lebanese and Arab writers, whether supportive of, opposing, or neutral toward the patriarchal regimes in their respective homelands, cannot but recognise that an approbatory reception of their literature is contingent on the absence of potentially subversive elements, however understated in the text they might be (p.190). Hence, the enabling proximity between the writer (Alameddine) and the referent (his homeland) allows him to indulge homoerotic themes envisioning full-blown male desire in a way that seems to vindicate this desire against

the long-established tradition of social and sexual conformity which has heretofore rendered it invisible.

Unlike his more recent novels such as *The Hakawati* (2006) and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), which also lambast patriarchy but not from a queer perspective, Alameddine's early fiction has largely sought to resist the coercion of the Lebanese (and in some stories like 'Duck' and 'The Changing Room' the Arab or Middle Eastern) homosexual into calibrated, conformist social moulds by presenting the West as a plausible refuge in which his exiled gay characters can thrive. As I have argued, a nuanced reading of this refuge is needed since the exilic sanctuary as changing/hanging room seems paradoxical. Its illiberal sexualized response to queerness as a form of otherness is extrapolated to similar issues of social castigation and sexualized abuse enacted by the hetero-normative patriarchal polity that has othered Alameddine's queer(ed) exiles in the first place. The Western sanctuary's seemingly antithetical notions of emasculation and empowerment become, ultimately, the very qualities factoring into his usage of strong sexual language in his explicit depiction of the coercive sexuality into which the encounter with the gendered and/or queered other has been relocated in different texts and cultural contexts in *The Perv*. Nonetheless, given the manifold constraints of compulsory heterosexuality in the Lebanese fatherland, deconstructed and debunked in Alameddine's narratives, the general impression that the ostensibly more tolerant West is more empowering than emasculating seems, at the moment, to settle the dust surrounding the paradox of the West as architect of queer autonomy in Rabih Alameddine's fiction.

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