

**Outsider Characters in Ghalib Halsa's Novels:  
*The Question as an Example***

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**ABSTRACT:** *Fictional characters in general, and the way they are built in a novel, have always been central to the genre production and appreciation. Writers exert strenuous efforts in creating their characters; and critics and readers often look into the artistic features in a literary character. During modernity and post-modernity, 'outsider' characters, in particular, have received special attention. Arab novelist Ghalib Halasa was one of the writers who forged a brilliant portrayal of loner characters, especially women. Unlike their marginal status in the society, Halasa's female characters are influential— an audacious dimension that is worthy of discussion. This study seeks to identify the loner characters, particularly females, in Ghalib Halasa's novels, taking *The Question as an example*. Specifically, the study will try to provide answers to three questions:*

- 1. What are the most important levels through which loner characters were depicted?*
- 2. Were loner characters a product of the society?*
- 3. Why was Halasa keen to target female outsider characters, in particular?*

**KEYWORDS:** peripheral character, Ghalib Halsa, Modernism, Levels of loneliness  
Outsider characters<sup>1</sup>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Responding to social, economic and political revolutionary changes, a large part of modernist literature has transformed from the traditional character to the loner character. This involves characters who stand outside the societal norms: the peripheral, the poor, the drunkards, the adulterous, the murderers, the disabled, and (sometimes) the ideological pundits. Loners are intrinsically powerless; they stand outside in full despair as a result of some social, political and economic conditions that stripped them off the power to adapt to the societal norms. In a sense, the behavior of these characters remains utterly peculiar; their relationship with the surrounding community is not governed by societal norms. That is why they tend to behave against the mainstream conventions. Often, they would stand their ground no matter the price they have to pay (detention, torture, etc). Their approach to life becomes bizarre, which raises many questions. As their psychological conditions are not socially stable, their sexual relations are also at odds with the societal norms. The borders, forms and nature of their sexual life are peculiar. In addition, loner characters have their own lexicon which exposes, rather than consecrates, language. Critics and readers thus need to pay careful attention to this peculiarity when they approach literary works.

Nevertheless, from a literary point of view, loner characters turn to be central. Literature, therefore, becomes a mirror that makes it easier for the reader to identify and reveal all characteristics and vivid features of these loners. By giving these characters a central role, the literary text works to rehabilitate them, giving them a space to avenge the circumstances that isolated them and gave them a second status in the society. The literary text also enables loners to voice their concerns, protest and even cynically criticize the society. Usually, loner characters are portrayed from different angles: social, political, economic, religious, sexual, linguistic, geographical, psychological and physical (see: Heibi, 2006: 17-27). This study will focus on three categories: social, political and sexual. Through my study of Halasa's works, I have noticed that the image of the brooding characters, especially women, figures prominently in his novels, as we will see later in this article.

## LEVELS OF LONELINESS IN HALASA'S NOVELS

### The Social level

A literary work portrays social alienation through detecting the relationship of the loner characters with their society. Typically, a peripheral character has a low degree of integration or interaction, which leads to a high degree of all-level isolation from the surrounding (see Blauner, 1967: 15-24). These relationships become a network of distorted communication, with no familial forces that can change the sense of loneliness. The loner character will thus continue to live in a state of estrangement, segregated from their surroundings, which might explain part of their odd behavior.

Halasa's novel *The Question* depicts the Egyptian 1952 post-revolution era. The novel tries to provide answers to many questions that were raised after the revolution. Ironically, all central characters in the novel are loners, yet with different levels and forms. Below, we study all the outsider characters in the novel, focusing on the social, political and sexual levels of alienation in the three central characters: Mustafa, Suad and Tafeeda. As the study focuses in particular on female loners, a large part of our analysis will be centered around Suad and Tafeeda.

In this wonderful novel, Mustafa lives in a state of alienation, avoiding interaction with the surrounding. Mustafa is a communist who is arrested for his political views; a frustrated intellectual who advocates for the distorted reality rather than tries to change it. His social relations with the society were forged by his loneliness. While he is now allowed to go to work, he still receives his salary at the end of the month: "After she had intently stared at the river, she asked him about the kind of job he takes. He answered, though he was sick of such a theme for discussion, that he works as a public sector employee. When she said she had heard from Suad that he did not go to work, he felt he was obliged to explain more. He said he restored his job, but he is not allowed to work. All what he does is receiving his monthly pay" (p. 677). This quotation reveals the alienation he was experiencing. Mustafa was renounced by the society (or at least by the official circles), which made him stand outside the society. The striking irony in the excerpt above only works to foster the character's estrangement<sup>2</sup>. A salary is typically granted conditional on working. Mustafa's receipt of a monthly salary is illogical. While this might occur when a person is powerful enough to compel the state to pay him without doing any service in return, this is not the case for Mustafa who was re-employed after an absence (detention), but was barred from work for the same reason that sent him to jail. This is a bizarre case that exposes the untrue revolution that was once believed to bring about

freedom. It is also the reason behind the estrangement of Mustafa, who was stripped him off the right to work, one of the basic rights of human beings.

At the social level, loners usually have relations. The distorted reality produces a state of relative estrangement. With increased isolation, much of the loners' daily interactions are with those who are also outsiders. Mustafa's social relations were confined to two groups: comrades in struggle, especially Walid and Nawal, and emotional/sexual affairs with Tafeda and Suad. Mustafa's alienation is basically manifested in his emotional/sexual relations with these two characters who live a geographically and socially peripheral life (more about these characters is discussed later).

Mustafa's oddity is not about the mere illicit sexual affairs with Suad and Tafeda. Rather, it is about a middle-class, educated man who seeks relationships with women from an inferior social class; and he finds utmost comfort in these relationships. He even prepares himself to take decisions that are as strange as the nature of these relationships. Mustafa could not bear the absence of Suad even though he was fully aware of her previous illegitimate sexual affairs. He does not hesitate in taking the daunting job of searching for her in the old neighborhoods of Cairo, a crowded city where finding a person at that time was almost impossible: "The woman turned around and let him in. Suad said eagerly: Look at you, Mustafa! It is incredible. It is my pleasure to see you again" (p. 558), and in another place: "When he held her hand and asked her why she stopped visiting him, he was a real lover, not only of Suad, ..." (p. 560). Mustafa hankers for a relationship with a woman who is more of a harlot than a demure woman, suggesting his isolation from his natural community (new neighborhoods of Cairo with a 'small bourgeois society', as he calls it). Mustafa feels that the true meaning of life and the real face of the community lie in these deserted poor neighborhoods. For a critic, this suggests a disapproval of the middle class community that clamps down on its members, forcing them to take refuge to these poor neighborhoods, where they find the true meaning of life, thus escaping the delusive life of their communities.

The emotions he has toward Suad uncover the anomie relationships and the haziness of reality as well. These emotions are taken as a means to protest the fallaciousness of the high-flying rhetoric of the middle class communities which pay only lip service, without putting slogans into practice. The individuals, finding themselves unable to communicate with their communities, take refuge to lower classes, at least psychologically.

Mustafa's later abandonment of the affair with Suad to a new affair with her aunt, Tafeeda, was but a further proof of his social alienation. The new connection suggests that an estrangement-based relationship will necessarily lead to more heterodox relationships. Mustafa abandons his passion for Suad and seeks an affair with a married woman, Tafeeda. These unnatural social relations are but a mirror of the distorted collective life in that society. Mustafa's sexual relationship with Suad developed into a love affair. With Tafeeda, he went very far; he explicitly admits that Tafeeda has given real meaning to his life: "Mustafa discovered an unexpected fact: though he was fully busy with Tafeeda, what he accomplished during the last few weeks outperformed his production throughout his life. The main achievement was his contribution to two groups of works (published by young writers and politicians) that were influential at the time. Before knowing Tafeeda, he was swinging between his yearning for the past, that guards him against amnesia, and daydreaming, which makes that past a future with different prospects. Tafeeda's presence in his life, his endeavors to discover her and his conflict

with the preconceptions he already had about her have helped him to be open to and fully immersed in the present moment" (p. 795). This is but a verification of Mustafa's multifaceted estrangement. First, Tafeeda's visits to his house demonstrate this bizarreness. She chooses him as a lover to share life with though she is married to another man. Atypical as it might seem by all societal standards, the loner attitudes have allowed these odd relationships where marriage is no longer the sacred link which combines a man and a woman. These irregular relations mirror the turmoil and uncertainty of the reality. Second, Mustafa's life changes radically when Tafeeda enters his life. As the vaunted revolution turned to be a mare's nest, many politicians and intellectuals lost hope. Tafeeda comes to inject in Mustafa the spirit of struggle, renewal and resilience, which in a short time made him produce works that would otherwise take him several years. That was wonderful. How could such a simple uneducated person bring about that massive change in Mustafa? Rationally, a woman that can make this radical change in Mustafa must be one who is fully aware of the sociopolitical events, not one who lives on the sidelines in a deserted neighborhood whose residents typically know nothing about politics. This anomalous situation is directly related to the textual meaning which exposes life at that time. The text teaches that real change must come from these poor neighborhoods that represent the true Egypt, not from high-end neighborhoods that are fascinated with the revolution. The revolution is born from the womb of simple Egyptian communities. These are the places that can bring about real change, and women in these communities are partners and they are as engaged as men. This is evident in the comparison that Mustafa draws between the outskirts and the poor neighborhoods, with personal inclination to the latter (p. 581; p. 756). Paying tribute to women as partners in revolution is consistent with Halasa's call to liberate women as an integral part in the process of liberating the society (see: Hamarneh, 2011: 44-45).

The social relations of Tafeeda (and Suad as well) were as substandard as those of the other characters in the novel, including Mustafa's. Tafeeda has peculiar social relations with her family. She lives with her husband and her niece Suad. Normally, family members living under one roof are supposed to have strong relationships, which is not the case for Tafeeda's family. Tafeeda lives her own separate world though she has a husband and a niece. She would leave home for days. Nobody would question that absence. She herself would not take the trouble making excuses for her absence: "The husband arrived early in the morning. He asked Suad about his wife. She said that Tafeeda had gone to a bedridden relative. He burst into tears thinking that she would not come back to him. Suad (laughing) says that sometimes he says "I do not deserve Tafeeda. She has been very patient with me," and then he bursts into tears." Mustafa asked: "Why didn't he take the trouble asking about that sick woman, so that he can go there?"

Suad replied: "He knows that the story of a sick woman is but a figment" (p. 634). This dialogue suggests that the characters not only live in estrangement, but they also go very far in their peculiar behavior. The husband cries rather than gets angry at the absence of his wife. He himself admits that he feels scared each time she leaves home. On the other hand, she has no problem leaving her home, and her husband. She goes beyond societal norms when she frequently takes the chance of leaving the neighborhood to reach Mustafa's house in the outskirts. It is a blatant breach of societal norms. The husband is unable to control the behavior of his wife and cries for her frequent absence; the wife has no qualm being in an illicit sexual relationship; and the niece knows all this but remains silent and even laughs at the husband when he starts to cry. A distorted reality has created this eccentric behavior in these loner characters.

The relationship between Suad and Tafeeda was also eccentric, but in a different form. They would shamelessly talk about their extramarital sexual affairs with the café owner and Hamid. Even worse, both Suad and Tafeeda fall in love with the same man, Hamid (p. 643), which is another manifestation of that bizarre behavior in post-revolution Egypt.

Early in the novel, the writer features two categories of the characters that show the estrangement of behavior: a lady from an upscale neighborhood, on the one hand, and Abdul Alim and his girlfriend Mona, on the other. The only connecting thread that brings these characters together is the 'killer'. The people are in a state of uncertainty. The panic created by the killer is by far greater than the collective concerns and national duties: "The crime scene is an apartment in Garden City Building. A forty-year-old woman is found dead. The killer stabbed her in sensitive places and at the bottom of her belly. The killer then laid her down in a position that Mustafa could not imagine. He placed her semi-naked on a sofa and spread her legs apart" (p. 505). This part of the novel reveals the loss and terror in the society: the killer behaves in a way that he believes would purify the society of the vices (The Killer articles, pp. 577-578), making himself both a judge and an executioner. He creates a state of personal law that is applied in an eccentric way. Obviously, the killer's behavior is but a reflection of the odd state of the community. What judges the actions of individuals in that community is a serial killer rather than the judicial system. Adopting the same method of killing with his victims has forced a strong presence of the killer. The ugly murder of Abdul Aleem, a renowned scientist in the Atomic Energy Centre, was a testimony of the distorted relationships that govern the society: "The newspapers wrote that the killer amputated a sensitive organ of Abdul Aleem's body and put it in a sensitive place. Despite the ambiguity of the phrase, the readers could figure out what really happened with the victim. The newspapers wrote that Abdul Aleem was completely naked. The killer placed him on a large bench and leaned his legs on a tea table in front of the bench" (p. 547). This grotesque<sup>3</sup> furthers the argument that the behavior of the society was disturbing and absurd. The mixed mode of tragedy and comedy is another manifestation of the confusion dominating the society (see: Kayser, 1963: 182-184). The talk about the mysterious killer precludes the existence of healthy relationships in the community. Serial killers are loners who cannot exist in a straight community. Wherever they are found, there must be something wrong in the community.

*The Question* has exposed this societal absurdity in a wonderful way. The building of the characters and the plot supports our argument that a distorted reality often produces odd relationships that are even more absurd. Above, the female loner characters emerge as a driving force that tries to produce a positive change in the society.

### **The political level**

The political level refers to the general political climate and the behavior of the characters within that climate. The political events, no matter the form and severity, influence the behavior of the individuals. To reflect on the political situation and the extent to which it informs the estrangement of literary characters, we will focus on two loner characters in the novel: Mustafa and Tafeeda. Egyptians had high hopes of deliverance and freedom following the 1952 revolution.<sup>4</sup> While the revolution shaped the present-day Egypt, it established a bureaucracy that was a source of disappointment for people (Heikal, 1987: 67-87)<sup>5</sup>.

Mustafa is a true communist who is arrested and barred from working (though he continued to receive his monthly salary) over his political views. He fully believes in the need for social justice secured by socialism: "Through this understanding of democracy (in which all classes have the right to express themselves freely), all national groups should be engaged in managing the public sector, and all should receive shares equal to their efforts" (p. 746). In theory, there is something common between the principles of the Revolution and the call Mustafa makes. In practice, however, both have conflicting views. The case of Mustafa suggests a wide gap between the revolutionary principles and practice— a disturbing state of affairs. While those who advocate the principles of the revolution are arrested, those who covertly smear these principles assume senior positions. Whereas the overlap between the characters' alienation and estrangement is unquestionable, this political distortion has further influenced the behavior of these characters, turning them into loners. This uncertainty has cast a shadow on social life, producing a state of estrangement and suspicion and making some intellectuals think about reforming the society with their own means; hence the emergence of the killer, for example. Worse, all levels (political, psychological, social and economic) are interwoven, which makes the characters' detachment grow larger, on the one hand, and attests the strange real world, on the other.

Often, the socially downtrodden characters are not interested in politics. However, the loner characters in *The Question*, especially females, are fully engaged. Though she admits that she knows little about politics, Tafeeda is eager to know what politics is: "When they sat to drink tea after the dinner, she asked:

"What is communism, Mustafa?"

"Communism?", he asked with discomfort.

"Yes, talk to me about communism," she insisted.

He told her that communism is a difficult term to explain. "Why does she want to know about communism?" He thought to himself.

She was amazed and said defiantly:

"Because you are a communist, and I want to become a communist."

A laughter escaped him.

She continued: "Why are you laughing? I want to join the Communist Party."

He thought to himself: "Where is it, Tafeeda?"

She said: "You are working for the poor. There are many of them out there. If you win their support, you will be very powerful. Meanwhile, you cannot win their support unless you explain to them what communism is."

"He agreed with her and came to know a fact that he never thought of. He never tried to explain to the poor and uneducated people the idea that he has sacrificed a lot for. In the past, he used to debate with people who knew the Marxist theory, in one way or another" (p. 692). Something starts to change in Mustafa's approach to advocating the communist ideology. This is but a proof that females can bring about change in the intellectual community. Tafeeda is a loner character, coming from a poor background, expressing unhesitatingly that she wants to know about Marxism and later join the party. Ironically, Tafeeda, the uneducated character, peculiarly outlines the plan that the party should draw to recruit more followers. In the bottom of the farce, she till now doesn't know what communism is. Naturally, advocating the principles of a party is a job to be done by the senior members, especially for a party that seeks to change the society. The above dialogue and its later implications lay bare the confused political scene that requires stepping back and reconsidering the current approaches.

The dialogue also reveals a fact about the Communist Party and its role in the Egyptian political life. The party and the Egyptian revolution have a lot in common, yet communists are completely absent from the political scene and the party members are prosecuted and arrested. Unquestionably, the political situation where a revolutionary partner is excluded and even deviled exposes a distorted political landscape.

Tafeeda's willingness to learn the principles of the Marxist theory is an indication of how brilliant this loner character is. She is pretty sure that the influence (or the attempt to influence) the political scene— or even the mere involvement in politics— is contingent on political awareness and knowing beforehand the political setting. She wants to know about communism and she urges Mustafa to educate the downtrodden classes. This outreach process, in Tafeeda's view, will broaden the popular incubator of the party, a fact that Mustafa himself failed to notice. Tafeeda's simple approach informs a basic premise: the party's strategy of supporting the poor is consolidated by gaining the support of this broad class which will logically join the party only after knowing the driving principles. This political discourse takes place among poor people in rundown neighborhoods, while the elite communities are unconscious about such narratives. This is a call for considering poor classes as a source for political change.

The arrest of Mustafa towards the end of the novel is a further proof of the absurdity of the political scene: "At 3 a.m., the doorbell rang violently. Some legs brutally knocked at the door. Tafeeda asked: "What?" Mustafa said to her:

"Relax! The police."

"What do they want?" She asked, trying to wake up.

He said to her: "They are coming to arrest me."

He got up and opened the door. They were many, and the whole apartment was packed.

Tafeeda was standing at the bedroom door. They searched the whole house, while Mustafa and Tafeeda were sitting in the living room whose door was guarded by an informer. They gathered a lot of papers that Mustafa knows wouldn't be of benefit to them. Then the officer asked Mustafa to go with them.

"It is only half an hour," said the officer.

Mustafa looked at Tafeeda and said: "Half an hour means a year" (pp. 848-849).

This concluding part of the novel suggests a circular structure for Mustafa's character rather than a circular plot. This structure, in turn, denotes the asymmetrical political situation. Mustafa's character appears in this novel after his release from prison and the novel closes with his return to prison. This cliffhanger literary technique suggests the sustainability of the narrative hook, as if we are caught in a loop of endless labyrinth, with no hope of salvation. The arrest of Mustafa at the end of the novel reveals the detachment of the mainstream politics and the anomalous behavior of the ruling junta. Under such a situation of confusion, even terms are misleading. Mustafa knows that 'half an hour' means an entire year.

The way the cops clamp down on political activists is another indication of bizarreness. They come under cover of darkness in a manner that is nothing short of barbarism. Mustafa's discernment that they are coming to take him to jail quite reinforces the prevailing eccentric political behavior of the time. The loner character (Mustafa) has a great ability to anticipate the odd behavior of the police. The peculiar behavior— and the ability of the individuals to identify that peculiarity— was a dominant feature of life in post-revolution Egypt.

The ongoing discussion suggests an interconnection between the social and the political levels. The asymmetrical political behavior has driven the peripheral characters, who are already loners, into more solitude. Meanwhile, the absence of a socially acceptable demeanor imposes a troubled political discourse. Just like the social level, the political level has also highlighted the role of the loner female characters that relentlessly seek knowledge and try to change the dire situation: "Tafeeda crept into Mustafa's political life. She succeeded in drawing his attention to practical measures that he, the veteran, previously failed to notice."

### **The Sexual level**

Sex in literature has always been central to scholarly work. It is closely related to human relations, particularly social and political (see: Accad, 1990: 1-7). This fact furthers our argument of the correlation between the three levels, on the one hand, and the strange behavior, on the other. This level identifies the types and forms of sexual relations in the novel. These relations are extramarital and, from a normative view, illegitimate. In this section, we will also discuss hyper sexuality (or sex addiction) as a rejection of the distorted reality and a cry for reconsidering the customs and traditions of the society. The extramarital sex exposes the physical and or emotional distancing between spouses. The rift might force spouses to seek satisfying their sexual desires through extramarital affairs, which creates schizophrenic individuals who cannot have sex with their spouses, while their desires are satisfied through illicit sexual affairs that the society disapproves of.

The majority of the novel characters are closely identified with sex. The lady from the upscale neighborhood that was horrendously slaughtered by the killer at the beginning of the novel had extramarital affairs: "It turned out that the victim had a husband who left her four years ago. The newspapers quoted the victim's neighbors saying that she would always arrange for revels, and that she avoided making relationships with people sharing her the building" (p. 506). Apparently, there is an explicit link between the political and social levels, on the one hand, and the sex level, on the other. In the excerpt above, the social estrangement between the husband and wife led the latter to throw raucous parties, which in turn led to extramarital sexual relationships. Avoiding relations with neighbors is an indication that she had the intention beforehand to enter into such illegitimate affairs without being subject to pursuit by intruders. The killer's appearance in the scene comes to expose the social disorder. It is true that the fornicators should be held accountable and punished, but not by a serial killer. The relationship which brought together Abdul Aleem and his girlfriend, Mona, was illicit: "She might have fallen asleep. She was not sure, but the door of Abdul Aleem's bedroom was opened. She waited for him to come out to her. Instead, a girl walked out of the bedroom. She was wearing a nightshirt and a dressing gown" (p. 525). The characters went further in their indecent behavior, and now adultery has become part of their normal daily life. Mona acts as if she was a wife, rather than a girlfriend or a mistress<sup>6</sup>, to Abdul Aleem. She stays with him and wears nightshirts. The real world has created a state of uncertainty at the political level— most prominently producing social stratification (the bourgeois classes against the proletariat), in stark opposition of the revolutionary principles of equality and social justice. This state of confusion fueled the people's lack of confidence in the political leadership. The characters' extramarital affairs were a reaction against that disorganization. An uncertain sociopolitical situation will inevitably drive characters to behave in an uncertain way.



Mustafa has two liaisons: one with Suad and the other with Tafeeda— an odd relationship where a man is in affair with a girl and her aunt. This only occurs in a community that gets on with anomalous relationships. Worse, these extramarital affairs have never been hashed out by Mustafa and Suad or by Mustafa and Tafeeda. These characters find much credence in such amours to the extent that the otherwise legitimate sexual liaisons are no longer needed. Mustafa's affair with Suad is "through and through erotic rather than emotional" (p. 507). "Suad leaned her head on his shoulder and said that she loves that place. He kissed and fondled her, and she started to yaw. He told her she could stay daytime and night at his apartment and that her aunt wouldn't feel worried about her. She opened her eyes wide and asked: "Wouldn't that bother you?"

He replied that he would be happy if she stayed. She yawned and said she would sleep for a while. She leaned her head on his shoulder. He found himself on the horns of a dilemma— having to flirt with a woman for 24 hours. It would be a boring job" (p. 508). Sex for him has become a temporary outlet for discharging stress. It was transient: once he finishes with her, he loses interest in her company, which is a sign of social estrangement that generates unnatural relationships that are purely erotic. Mustafa himself admits that, at least at this stage of their affair.

Suad and Tafeeda's connections are quite promiscuous. First, having such connections is improper under the accepted codes of society. Second, the relationships are outside the holy bonds of marriage. Third, they are sexually indiscriminate. Suad lives three sex experiences: with Hamid, with university students and with Mustafa, as shown in the figure below, which also shows Mustafa and Tafeeda's affairs:

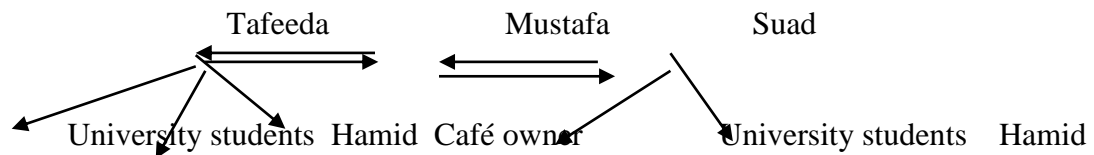


Figure 1: Sexual affairs network

The perverse sexual behavior in Suad and Tafeeda is furthered by the overlap in their sexual affairs: "Suad told Mustafa that once, or even many times, she and her aunt loved the same person?" (p. 636). Suad explicitly admits that she and her aunt would have the same paramour. The strange social relationships between Suad and her aunt created bizarre sexual relationships. The first experience<sup>7</sup> for Suad started when she entered into an affair with her aunt's significant other, Hamid (p. 639-640). This is an aberrant liaison occasioned by decadent social relationships that allow these two women to have sex with the same person. The social barriers that prohibit such a relationship are no longer there. Furthermore, Suad-Hamid's affair appears disproportionate because of the age gap between them. She even insists on this painful adventure lest he think she is an inexperienced child. It is legitimate here to raise a question: If this relationship is odd in nature, why cannot the justifications be strange as well? Suad's social alienation<sup>8</sup> created a very peculiar sexual affair. The second sexual experience was at her work in the university: "The second day, I went to work, there were three students from Lebanon. Two of them went to the university, and one stayed. He was young; he loved me, but he was

timid.

"Did you rape him?"  
"Exactly" (p. 644)

Suad's bizarre behavior has no limits. Usually, women don't want to appear pushy or come on too strong for proposing and initiating sex. This is not the case for Suad, who is always an initiator. She even forces the student to have sex with her; she literally rapes him. This wild behavior is in disregard of all societal norms. Usually a man dogs a woman and he often exerts efforts to win her. Suad's approach is a short cut, saving the man the trouble of chasing her; she is always ready for sex. Worse, Suad would even take no notice of the man who is self-disciplined (p. 645), and to punish him, she would flirt with his colleague in front of him.

Tafeeda's sexual life is no exception. Her affairs are even bolder and much more freakish. The character has four sexual relationships: Hamid, the café owner, university students and Mustafa. Tafeeda's sexual relationships are more wild than Suad's simply because the former is married. Tafeeda would take these people as paramours. We intentionally exclude her marital relationship from her affairs because she wouldn't have sex with her husband. The social level has extremely influenced her sex relationships. The social estrangement she and her husband suffered for long drove her to seek satisfaction outside the holy bonds of marriage. They lost interest in one another to the degree that they rarely had sex, and their intercourse was transient and emotionless. It is no wonder then that Tafeeda would stay for days at Hamid's apartment: "Hamid would stay several days with the aunt" (p. 650), and elsewhere: "You loved Hamid, didn't you? She nodded in agreement" (p. 684). A harmonious social relationship between two people usually last for a while, and vice versa. The loner characters in the novel consider such illicit relationships to be morally bound. Suad says that the presence of a significant other in her aunt's life is necessitated by the tragic circumstances the aunt suffers, considering the estrangement she experiences with the husband. Ironically, the immoral behavior becomes a need. Still, the affairs the characters have are only erotic without catching feelings, with no emotions being involved. The characters choose a purely physical fling, thinking they will be better off without any emotional strings attached. This type of sexual relationship is probably the easiest on the heart and mind. This is well manifested by the behavior of the café owner with Tafeeda. It also explains why Tafeeda refuses to get married to Hamid or the café owner, but accepts Mustafa's proposal.

Just like Tafeeda-Suad's relationships with both Hamid and Mustafa, Tafeeda's connections with university students overlap with Suad's affairs with university students. This overlap is a result of the unnatural social relationships. The approaches of Tafeeda and Suad also overlap. Suad rapes the Lebanese student and her aunt does the same with a student named Mohammed: "Then came Mohammed, a student who my aunt loved... He came to my house. I wasn't there. My aunt was there; she took the opportunity and raped him" (p. 655). This recurrent phenomenon in the novel suggests its existence in reality. However, Tafeeda's sexual behavior changes radically when she starts the affair with Mustafa. Because the new character treats her with respect, her relationship with him has transposed into emotional relationship rather than a mere erotic affair.

The bizarre sex relationships attest to the peculiarity of the situation and the alienation of the loner characters. Such relationships are only repercussions of unusual social and political life,

which creates the conditions necessary for such estrangement of the novel characters. The sexual level also gives prominent presence to loner females and their vital role in changing the behavior of characters through sex (specifically the change Suad and Tafeeda creates in Mustafa).

## CONCLUSION

Ghalib Halasa's *The Question* thoroughly featured the outsider characters across three different but interrelated levels (social, political and sexual). At each level, there was a presence of the other two levels as drivers for behavior. The three levels have a central theme: The peculiar situation will necessarily produce atypical social and political relations, which, in turn, create illicit sexual behavior which firmly serve out the already existing distortion. The loner characters are only an outcome of these odious conditions. Choosing the idea of alienation of characters and their strange behavior was not arbitrary. The post revolution era in Egypt produced peculiar conditions that have been well depicted by literary works that focused on these specific levels characteristic of life in that period.

The loner female characters were particularly brought into focus. Ghalib Halasa's novel was a brilliant illustration of how the female loner character can play a vital role in changing reality and behavior of others. He succeeded in changing the typical image of an eastern woman who is always vulnerable and subject to degradation and oppression. The real change in the life of the novel characters, specifically Mustafa's, was created by women: Suad and Tafeeda. With Suad, he felt that he regained his masculinity that he lost for long. Tafeeda, in turn, gave meaning to his social, political and sexual life. The effectiveness of loner character is quite consistent with Ghalib Halasa's beliefs. Paying tribute to women as partners in the revolution is in agreement with Halasa's call to liberate women as an integral part in the process of liberating the society. Halasa depicted the poor loner female characters only to teach us that real change must come from these poor neighborhoods. The novel forged a brilliant, objective, insightful and meticulous portrayal of the unusual social relationships in post-revolution Egypt.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations in this study were taken from the Complete Fiction Works of Ghalib Halasa, Dar Al-azmina, Amman, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For further reading on irony, see: Nasser Shabana, *The irony of the modern Arabic poetry*. (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2002). See also: Soren Kierkegaard :The Concept of Irony. London: Collins, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The term grotesque defines a situation in which two separate modes, comedy and tragedy, are mixed. The result is a disturbing fiction wherein comic circumstances prelude horrific tragedy and vice versa. See Fayad Heibi, **Satire in the Lebanese novel**. Haifa: Kol Shei Library, 2012 (pp63-76).

<sup>4</sup> The 23 July Revolution is the Free Officers Movement (which emerged in the Egyptian military after 1948) led by Muhammad Najib and Jamal Abdel Nasser. The movement succeeded in carrying out a bloodless coup, controlling all vital facilities in the country, and more importantly, abolishing the Egyptian monarchy. After the revolution, Major General Muhammad Najib took office and then his successor, President Jamal Abdel Nasser. The Revolution aimed at eliminating feudalism, fighting colonialism, establishing a democratic life and achieving social justice.

<sup>5</sup> In his book *To Egypt, not to Abdel Nasser*, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal tries to expose all charges against Nasser. The aim of the book was not to defend Abdel Nasser as much as a desire to provide explanations to the Egyptians. What counts here is the bureaucratic misbehavior in the internal political practice, which breached the general principles of the revolution.

<sup>6</sup> Mona told Zakeya, the maidservant, that she is engaged to Abdul Aleem. However, after Abdul Aleem and Mona had been murdered, Mona's mother denied any relationship between Abdul Aleem and her daughter. That is why we say his girlfriend (or a mistress): "Her mother denied any relationship, whatsoever, between the two" (p. 566). Mona used 'fiancée' only to justify being with an affair with a man or she meant a would-be husband.

<sup>7</sup> In this section, we discuss two experiences only. The third experience was discussed in the section dedicated to Mustafa's sexual relationships.

<sup>8</sup> When Suad's father died, her mother got married to another. Because Suad and her stepfather were always at odds, the mother sent the daughter to live with her aunt, Tafeeda. By doing so, the mother wanted to keep her new husband (p. 636).

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