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Muslim Migrant Masculinity in Robin Yassin Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*

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Abstract

Masculinity, unlike femininity, has long been left understudied by the scholars. This originated from the essentialist stance that men and masculinity were natural, and subsequently had been taken for granted. They were there, not requiring to be studied. Men, as subjects, were deemed as the agents who gazed and studied. However, with the advent of structuralist and poststructuralist ideas in humanities and specially in social theory, masculinity attracted attentions. No longer was masculinity considered natural, God-given. Now the new theories regarded masculinity as a constructed phenomenon subject to cultural, structural, discursive, and material forces. Therefore, it was, inevitably, subject to change and was no longer seen as an essential entity. These theoretical interventions spread, though belatedly, into the realm of literary studies. Literature, especially fiction, provides very rich materials to explore the dynamics and nuances of theory. The present article applies theories in the field of masculinity studies from social theory to a novel by the British-Syrian writer Robin Yassin Kassab. *The Road from Damascus* could be a useful text to investigate how masculinity is produced and reproduced, constructed and changed as men experience different social structures. The novel, successfully, takes masculinity as a sign whose significance alters as it moves from one structure to another. A significant aspect of the novel is its focus on immigrant people in the cultural space of England. The

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article investigates how the two "modalities" of masculinity and immigration invite new meanings into the previous studies done on the work.

Keywords: Masculinity Studies, Gender Roles, knowledge, Migrant Masculinity, *Road from Damascus*, Immigrant, Identity, Hegemonic Masculinity.

1. Introduction

A significant paradox in both social theory and humanities is what Gottzen et al. (2020) call "the absent present of male gender" (1). They mean that although men have always been present in and dominated the scholarly fields in humanities, they have not shown any interest to study men and masculinity. The early theoretical and practical studies on men, though sporadic, originated from feminist theories. The lack of studies on men stemmed from the essentialist view of them. Men are simply there, created and marked by God as men. It was only during 1980's and afterward that the early signs of interest in and necessity of masculinity studies emerged. The major question of these studies is what happens if we look at men not simply as humans but rather as men? What new ideas emerge? These questions become more urgent when the masculinity/masculinities are positioned as "other" concerning religion and migration. Migration creates a new structure where men are placed in new positions and their seemingly natural position is challenged and unsteady state of their power and position is exposed.

Meanwhile, along with these developments in theory, literary scholars, too, though lately, are drawn to the field. As Jonathan Culler (2009) states, literary works do not offer straight answers to theoretical questions. Although it might be possible to find proofs in a literary work which support the principles of a certain theory, it also provides "rich materials for complicating" and problamatising (140) theories. The present article highlights how studies in masculinity help discover new significance in Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2011) and how, reciprocally, the novel can contribute to the current masculinity studies providing fresh understanding and creating new meanings.

2. Theoretical Background

Gender studies has a somewhat long history dating back to the late 1940s and the

publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir initiated the feminist scholarship which relentlessly investigated the processes through which women were either forced or hegemonically persuaded by the patriarchal order to accept their unfair status throughout history. The common denominator of almost all forms of feminist activism, both theoretical or practical, has been a focus on how women were controlled and suppressed. This consideration gave rise to the emergence of the idea of gender as opposed to sex. Sex was defined as the "biological differences between men and women, and gender as the social differences associated with each sex" (Messerschmidt, 2018: 21) or more accurately as the roles which are assigned to men and women by any given culture. This entailed the idea that gender was a cultural *construct* and therefore subject to change over time and space.

However, the field of gender research, until very recently, has mainly focused on "woman question" (Kimmel, 2005: 1) as if the word gender is coined only for women, not both sexes. Unlike femininity, masculinity had not drawn much attention from scholars. The problem arises from the historical notion that masculinity was considered something natural and essential which transcended investigation. As Jeff Hearn and Richard Howson observe, "for a long time 'gender' was largely seen as a matter of and for women; men were generally seen as ungendered, natural or naturalized" (Hearn et al 2020: 19). The idea has two implicit overtones. First, to use Derrida's terminology, masculinity was deemed a transcendental signified in relation to which, other gender signs took their signification. Its own meaning was ahistorical, immaterial, out of relationality, and fixed in time and space. These are the qualities which are used by early feminists when they approach the concept of patriarchy. Millet, for example, contends that the relationship between men and women is controlled by patriarchy. She defines patriarchy as a form of social organization through which "half of the populace which is female is controlled by half of which is male" (qtd. in Messerschmidt 2018: 3). Although she later emphasizes the idea that gender is socially constructed, she only focuses on how femininity is constructed. Millet creates a dichotomy in which women/femininity are defined against men/masculinity as if masculinity were an essential, and ahistorical concept which does not undergo change.

The new masculinity studies, however, challenges all these traditional ideas and

emphasize the fact that all those critical investigations applied to femininity could be applicable to masculinity as well. Based on this new approach, the main characteristics of masculinity studies could be categorized as follows. It recognizes "men and masculinities as explicitly gendered" (Armengol 2017: 41) and understands it as a social construct by highlighting the constructedness of masculinity which is produced and reproduced. It also emphasizes the fact that masculinity is conceptualized within variety of social structures especially "the relational, the discursive" (Messerschmidt 2018: 117) and "the material" (Armengol 2017: 41). Furthermore, it foregrounds the theory that men should be studied not as mere human beings but as gendered beings. This entails the idea that there is not only one masculinity but there are "multiple masculinities" (Connell et al. 2005: 3). In fact, the main objective of new masculinities theories is "to treat masculinity not as the normative referent against which standards are assessed but as a problematic gender construct." (Kimmel 1987 as qtd. in Bjerre, 2012: 244).

A significant, ground-breaking concept introduced by Raewyn Connell to masculinity studies is the "hegemonic masculinity" (2005) which has proved very productive for understanding the power relation between genders. By hegemonic masculinity, Connell means the processes or strategies through which certain masculinity/masculinities "legitimate unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and among masculinities" (Messerschmidt 2018 p: 46). Among others, a familiar strategy exploited by hegemonic masculinity is othering other groups through effeminizing, emasculating or dehumanizing discourse.

3. Literature Review

A few articles are written on *The Road from Damascus*. Sadeghi et al. (2022) explore how the novel writes back to Orientalist representations of Muslims in the West. They argue that the novel materializes this goal through depiction of the variety of ways of being a Muslim which is in contrast to the monolithic portrayal of Muslims in the West. Catherine E. Rashid (2012) emphasizes the way Robin Yassin Kassab uses the Islamic Sufi concept of Kashf-o-Shohood (literally discovery and intuition) as an aesthetic principle through which the main character undergoes transformation. Clair Chambers (2012) focuses on two distinct ideas. First, she tries to show whether

Robin Yassin Kassab's novel belongs to the category of "Muslim fiction". Next, she explores the reason why the main character of the novel is pushed away from biographical identity to identity politics.

4. Bifurcation of Secularism as Masculine versus Islam as Feminine

The Road from Damascus depicts the vicissitudes of Sami Tairifi's life from his early childhood to the time he is a 31-year-old adult searching for his identity. Sami is the only son of a Syrian immigrant family in London. When he was 16-year-old, he had lost his powerful patriarchal and supportive father, Mustafa Traifi. Under the influence of his father, he had not managed to develop a wholesome relationship with his mother, Nur Kallas. Following his father's path, he enters university to study Arabic literature to continue the father's legacy. He marries an Iraqi-born girl, Muntaha, and lives with him in London.

Using the theories of masculinity, the paper follows the trajectory of Sami Traifi's masculinity, the way it takes shape, is constructed, reconstructed, and how it undergoes change. Sami's masculinity is constructed under discursive, relational, and material forces. It is important that all these forces operate in the space of immigration where the two discourses of secularism and Islam are set against each other in the form of a binary opposition, each pressing for the dominant role in shaping his identity. Considering relational aspect of the main character's masculinity, different structures are at work in which Sami is positioned as a masculine subject. The first one is Sami's childhood family with his father and mother each representing the two major formative discursive forces in the novel. The second structure is the space of London as the host locus in which Sami's masculinity as an immigrant takes a new turn. Another influential structure is Sami's married life wherein he and his wife seem to involve in a power struggle over the gender roles assigned to them. The final force at work affecting Sami's masculinity is the material or historical reality of the world which can be divided into microcosmic and macrocosmic worlds.

The major site of struggle between the two opposite discourses in the narrative is knowledge. A significant aspect of the struggle is that it is gendered. Throughout the novel the struggle is about which gender should be granted the authority of knowledge. Discursively, Sami's father holds the most important status in defining Sami's identity

as a man. From early childhood, Mustafa Traifi self-appoints himself as the patriarch in his family and the one who is in charge of instructing his son. The relationship between Mustafa and Sami is primarily defined by the father-son relationship with the father positioned as the mentor/teacher and the son as the apprentice. Mustafa's discursive mission to educate his son is realized via two directions. His main focus is on establishing a binary in which Islam is set as the "other" against both secularism and the Great Arab nationalism as the central and more powerful signs of identity. More importantly, however, it is Mustafa's gendering this binary as masculinity against femininity.

Remembering his father's reaction to her mother's (Nur) efforts to teach her son the Qur'an, Sami narrates that his father had "protected him (i.e. Sami) from womanly superstition (i.e. Islam) (Kassab 2009: 20). To Mustafa, "the renowned author of" the book "*Secular Arab Consciousness*" (46), and consequently, to his son, secularism is rendered as the masculine rationality threatened by feminine, irrational, lunatic Islam. Therefore, it is required that Islam and those who believe in it be subdued, controlled, and educated by masculinist secularism. More significantly, it is suggested that adopting Islam—being associated with femininity and womanhood—emasculates and enfeebles men, positioning them on the opposite side of the binary opposition, that is, the women's side.

Underscoring the masculine secularist discourse, Mustafa couples it with the discourse of Great Arab nationalism which is clearly masculinised. Sami whose name is likely to be associated with the Arabic word for sky, Samaa, is born in 1969. It means that his birth occurs just two years after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 which led to the humiliating defeat of the Arab countries. Demoralized by the crippling defeat, the Arab intellectuals such as Mustafa start constructing the imagined narrative of the Great Arab Nation to compensate for the loss and humiliation. It is in this context that Sami is brought up by Mustafa. The narrative is defined, before everything, with its heroic, masculine mythologies and epics especially the well-known story of *Gilgamesh.* Sami is positioned by her father as "my own little Enkidu, my little wild man" (61). The failed Arabs, similar to Mustafa, are desperately digging up a lost, museum-fitting masculine, heroic glory to forget the bitter reality of their modern era.

Mustafa takes a further step to protect the discursive formation of his son's

masculinity to save him from the desperation he and his contemporary Arab nations were suffering from. He refers his son to movies produced in the west. Every Saturday, the father and the son, exclude Nur, the mother, to go to cinema to watch films which cast stereotypical heroic male characters who overcome all the problems and challenges to win love and admiration of others. The occasion which is as "educative, as acculturating" a ritual "as a Friday mosque visit" (43) manages to make Sami identify with male superheroes, to buttress the masculinity constructed through reading ancient epics of Sumerian literature. Therefore, Sami's childhood-through-adolescence identity is mainly constructed through a masculinity defined by three different but convergent discourses: the discourses of progress, anti-Islam secularism, and Great Arab Nations. All through the course of Sami's early childhood, Mustafa meticulously overseers his son's growth as a teacher while excluding Nur (and her religious ideas) from being involved in Sami's education.

5. Lack of power and Hyper-masculinity

With Mustafa's death, and Sami's relationship with his mother broken up, Sami's masculinity formation enters a new stage. Now he joins the mainstream British cultural space, especially its universities, and starts a new relationship which changes the meaning of his masculinity. The main signs of the new structure are Sami's English girlfriends who study in the same university. Sami's relationship with English girls is characterized with the feeling of being under the "gaze". One important reason for this position of passivity is Sami's "foreign" status as an immigrant. Coupled with his sense of alienation is Sami's equal standing with the girls in terms of his 'knowledge,' which has been a primary source of power for him. This pushes him towards a pseudo hypermasculinity to compensate for the lack of power he feels in the foreign space of London. In fact, he "chooses … [a] position that helps [him] ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness"(Messerschmidt 2018: 41). His relationship with these girls is mainly pictured through sexual and body images. Being conscious of his foreignness and lack of belonging, he invokes exaggerated physical, masculine features to "hunt" the English girls.

From the girls' perspective Sami is a typical oriental immigrant "other". They trap him in their Orientalist discourse which reifies and positions him as an exotic,

oriental fetish, a desirable object of sex. Sami is nothing but "full, tasting mobile lips, …. passion heavy eyebrows" (23). They reduce his identity to his sex role, stripping him off his other facets of it. For the same reason, he sees his relationship with the girls as one between a carnivorous predatory animal and its prey: [Like] "a tiger that killed in order to be assured of the sharpness of its teeth" (22). The English girls exclude Sami from their culture. They do not allow their relationship to Sami transcend from sex. In fact, they dehumanize him and push him back to animal sphere.

Sami, in relation to the English girls, adopts what Zizek calls "symbolic identification" (as cited in Santesso 2013: 101) in which one identifies with the way others perceive him/her. This reveals Sami's vulnerable position as an immigrant in England, especially after his father's death; he buys into the English girls' perception of him. The power relation in this new structure is controlled by the English girls who make Sami to passively play for them the sex role they desire. Sami calls this "a sexy version of the Arab world" (22). This kind of powerless, passive masculinity imposed on Sami by the native English girls seems to be in contrast to what his father had ingrained in him in his childhood i.e. the heroic Enkidu of *Gilgamesh*, or the hero in the films who is in control of everything, moving progressively from past to present to future. Therefore, the English girls do not seem to "measure up to something he was waiting for" (21). As a consequence, he takes a new direction.

6. Knowledge and Masculine Authority versus "Emphasized Femininity"

Sami enters a new relationship and subsequently a new structure, re-forming his gender identity. He meets Muntaha, an exiled Iraqi-born girl who lives with her family in London. The narrative juxtaposes Sami's relationship with Muntaha with her previous relationships with his "English girlfriends". Sami's relationship with Muntaha involves two important aspects. First, Sami sees himself as "more English than her" (103), a notion granting him the feeling of an English native as compared to Muntaha. Muntaha represents the Orientalist "emphasized femininity" (Messerschmidt 2018: 51). Unlike those occasions in the universities which he felt under the gaze, here he takes the role of the active subject who gazes at an object with agency. It is Muntaha who is under the gaze. With Muntaha, Sami regains his sense of masculine power and controlling the situation. He positions rather than

being positioned, interpellates, to borrow Althusser's terminology, rather than being interpellated.

Where the English girls pushed him to play the role of "sexy identity-assertion" (Kassab 2009: 242), here it is Sami who positions Muntaha as "a Sexy version of the Arab world", as a "proper Arab" (22). "Proper" suggests different significations. The explicit meaning of the word is the sexual attraction he waited for in a woman. However, it has the more hidden and nuanced implication of "the emphasized femininity" (Messerschmidt, p. 26) which yields to the rules of normalcy established by the "hegemonic masculinity". In Sami's case, a normal "emphasized femininity" is defined by a lack of agency and intellectual dependence. At the British Museum Sami looks at Muntaha as "she was entirely still, like an exhibit itself. A Mesopotamian Woman …" (25). To Sami, Muntaha like an object displayed in a Museum, is the object of his gaze. She is part of the ideal past which must be protected and kept safe from change. She seems to be objectified as the bride in John Keats's poem < Ode on a Grecian Urn>. Interestingly Sami uses the word "unravaged" (Kassab 127) to describe Muntaha's skin in her late twenties.

Muntaha, at least in the starting point of her relationship with Sami, helps Sami to enjoy all the core elements of his masculinity i.e. Arab, secular (Muntaha does not wear a Hijab), heroic. Meanwhile, Muntaha who is aware of the gender norms of the Arab world promotes Sami's confidence in his masculinity by feigning "emphasized femininity" to create in Sami the feeling of power and control, of his expression of "hegemonic masculinity":

> In the Museum she allowed herself to be led. … She let him do most of the talking…. It was clear he wanted to show off his *knowledge*, and she appreciated that…. So when he already knew what he was telling her she kept quiet. She even pretended surprise … to encourage him. (102) (my emphasis)

Here, Muntaha highlights the second aspect of her relationship to Sami besides his feeling of being "more English" (103). Sami sees the relationship as a means to confirm his masculine authority and knowledge. Pretending to be naïve and less knowledgeable, Muntaha helps him enjoy the sense of masculine dominance. To him, knowledge nurtures power and masculinity, and a lack of knowledge makes him powerless. In the Museum scene he clearly expresses the idea as follows: "I like

knowledge…. It puts … [me] in charge of the world" (27). In the same scene where he meets Muntaha, the first piece of information he offers to Muntaha, as introductory words, is his doctoral program, perhaps in hope of putting himself "in charge" of the microcosmic world of his relationship with his future wife. Later in the novel where after ten years Sami fails to produce a proper doctoral thesis, he desperately declares that it has made him "in his own eyes, not much of a man. Unsettled. Out of place…." (46).

7. (Im)proper Femininity as a Challenge to Masculinity

Sami's safe and secure masculinity remains unshaken for so long after the marriage and as Muntaha performs the expected gender roles desired by Sami i.e. being or behaving as "a proper Arab" woman. In Sami's worldview, inculcated on him by his father, a "proper" woman is the one who is committed to the masculine knowledge represented by the anti-Islam, secular ideology. So far as she sticks to the idea, she is considered unthreatening. A clear contradiction with Sami is his support of a liberated free woman on the one hand, and his fear of the same woman on the other hand. The moment he feels the liberated woman may move towards being "in charge" he feels unsettled. The same hold true for his father as well. Mustafa, for example, had encouraged/ordered her wife, Nur, to adopt western style of clothes and hair. The main reason for the decision was that it positioned him as the masculine authority who sets the rules, controls the feminine body, defines femininity. Due to the same fact, when Nur decides to choose a different lifestyle, i.e. Islamic one, Mustafa turns to violence and terrorizes her using his masculine power.

The same holds true for Sami and Muntaha. Sami chooses Muntaha because he misconstrues her as the ideal, "proper" Arab woman who is paradoxically, simultaneously modern and traditional: traditional in the sense of being that kind of woman who is the representation of "emphasized femininity" signifying a femininity which functions according to the principle of "normalcy" defined by the dominant masculinity. For Sami, a proper, normal Arab woman is the one who accepts the authority of his husband/partner, the one who consents to being dominated, to being controlled. By modern he means a woman who lives according to what he assumes to be the western values, defying the Islamic values. Sami, entrapped in a

contradictory discursive situation, expects Muntaha to observe the requirements of both these "normal" gender roles. Muntaha duly characterizes him with the following words: "Sami Traifi, you are not a man. You're a contradiction." (117). It is due to the same reality that in the very moment that he feels excited by Muntaha in the British Museum he feels "disabled by happiness, as if it was a trap, a drunkenness necessary to make him fall" (29). Sami's contradictory feelings stem from Muntaha's dual qualities which simultaneously confirm and defy his masculine expectations. She is traditional in the sense that, like the imagined women from the Arab world, she follows the requirements of the femininity. She seems to be meek, as she consents to Sami's exertion of his "hegemonic masculinity". Her appearance also meets Sami's expectations of a "proper" Arab woman:

> A proper Arab. Baghdad-born, she had an accent. The way she dressed, tidy, and formal, declared her. So did the careful way she walked. Her movements and her speech were upright and courteous. She was every bit as Arab as the Kuffiyeh he checked in the mirror before leaving his flat (22-23).

Sami's sense of happiness is as real as is his sense of fear and disability, the latter caused by what he finds beneath the "surface" of a dress, speech, and body. Muntaha does not live up to Sami's expectations because she is a modern "woman", of course not in the sense Sami, his father, and men like. She is a modern woman in the alternative sense of being intellectually independent, of challenging the stereotypical masculine assumptions. Sami feels threatened when Muntaha's intellectuality blurs the strict lines of masculine/feminine gender roles. When Sami expects knowledge and intellectuality to lay with men to put them in charge of the world, to grant them the role of instructors, a woman like Muntaha challenges the image by her independent, sharp insight, and rejects to remain an apprentice. In fact, Muntaha overthrows the longstanding binary oppositions kept intact for centuries both in real world and in men's imaginary world.

In the crucial scene of the British Museum Sami starts discussing about the relics in the museum to show off his knowledge about the ancient pre-Islamic Arab culture. Finding Sami attracted to the exhibit, Muntaha asks him why he deems the relics important. Sami answers that "my father used to bring me here. This was his favorite exhibit" (26). Muntaha's response to the same question is a seemingly

innocent: "I don't know if it's important or not. It depends on what you're looking for. It's beautiful and old." Unlike Sami's answer, dependent on his father's legacy, Muntaha's answer reflects Muntaha's insightful, though modest, independence. A few lines onward, Sami points to a statue of mythical gods Muntaha was looking at, and tells her that she should be proud of it because it was originally from "Sumeria", the ancient name of modern Iraq. She answers that she is "from Iraq, not Sumeria. We have different gods today. Gods with Mustaches" (26). Though very young, and not yet academically educated, her answer is both historically and politically significant, highlighting the authoritative, unbounded masculine power which holds the Arab world in its grip. Muntaha, astutely, declines idealizing the past, by emphasizing the gendered nature of destructive power in the Arab world. Sami, a PhD student and much older, dependent on his father's legacy, is "disabled" by Muntaha's sharp, independent insight. Muntaha's powerful intellectuality destabilizes Sami's imagined authority as a masculine mentor who holds the right to knowledge.

Sami establishes a major part of his masculinity on the role of teaching and instructing others, especially his wife. From the early moments of his familiarity with Muntaha, Sami hurries to perform the role of teacher and starts conveying his "knowledge" to her. It seems that men are naturally born with the privilege to teach while women are predetermined to be apprenticed. In his very first meeting with Muntaha where he is "captivated" by her beauty, he reads this as a power struggle and tries to reverse the balance:

> Fighting the paralysis of this awe, Sami started to take the lead, showing her around, explaining things. This was the pattern that would continue through the coming decade…. He asked himself what he could teach her….". (27)

The role of a teacher is defined for him as a masculine one. So long as he secures the role for himself, he feels safe and secure as a man. But in those moments the role is challenged he feels he has lost control and is enraged. A typical of such a moment is when, well into the narrative, Sami is informed by Muntaha that she was going to wear Hijab. Her inclination to Islamic faith represented by Hijab signifies her moving away from Sami's decade-long teachings, and shatters his role as a teacher-husband. Muntaha's choice of Hijab is interpreted by Sami as betrayal. He demands, "What about loyalty to me? …. A bit of loyalty. That's all I ask" (115).

Mustafa had felt the same after his wife, Nur, had turned to Islam. Both regard their wives' turning to religion in terms of leaving their marriage vows. To these men, their wives' adopting Islamic identity is tantamount to betrayal and the loss of control over the women, "The Hijab issue felt like a wheel spinning in silence after a crash. The crash had already happened" (115).

8. An Alternative Masculinity

Hijab, for Sami, is symbolic of the final stage of imbibing an alternative religious knowledge which challenges the masculine, secular knowledge. Sami follows his father's ideology of regarding Islam as superstition against secular Arab culture which he regards as a safe guard against superstition. Therefore, his thesis which combines the secular Arab poetry with the Western methodology provides him with what he finds necessary to perform the role of mentor/teacher. When his thesis is rejected, he feels doubly failed, and takes refuge in different bars, overdosing himself on alcohol and "spliff" i.e. marijuana and is consequently engaged in unselfconscious sexual affair with an unknown woman. He is also arrested by the police and sent to a prison along with a man described through Sami's point of view as "A huddle of clothed flesh – a tramp, a drunk – something perhaps dangerous, or perhaps not alive. Something, in any case, which stank (200)".

Sami objects to the policeman not to "[put] me there with that". The policeman responds that "to be honest, sir, I can't see much difference between him and you" (200). The policeman's statement makes Sami aware of a bitter reality of himself. The stinky object-man is the mirror image of Sami, the man. It seems that for the first time in his life he has found an honest mirror in front of him. The mirror-image puts Sami "on the verge of … lifting a veil" (201). All through his life he had been blindfolded by the masculine ideology his father had interpellated him into. This ideology had made him nothing different from the stinky "clothed flesh". The prison sets him free from his self-made cage of the ideology. He needs to learn another way of being a man, another kind of knowledge. After being released from the prison, Sami returns home to be rejected when Muntaha becomes aware of his affair in the bar.

Homeless and stripped off all sources of his masculinity, Sami feels obliged to reshuffle his lifelong understanding of knowledge and masculinity. As he

acknowledges, "the blocks with which he had built his personality – Arabism and poetry – had begun to rot" (46). He is also thrown out of university and is unable to finish his doctoral thesis as his most important emblem of his masculine identity. His internal turmoil is worsened when he observes both in Arab countries and around the world "religion grew" (46) as secularism diminished. He is involved in what Messerschmidt calls "reflexivity" meaning that he is "engage[d] in internal conversations with [himself] about particular social experiences and then decide how to respond appropriately" (116). He starts to rethink about the religion and God. Perhaps his most significant moment of mental transformation is portrayed in the narrative as follows: "Now he claimed a doctrine of radical *unknowing*, and the beginnings of acceptance" (386, emphasis added). As a result, in the context of 9/11 when almost all Muslims are socially alienated as potential terrorists, he is invited back to home by Muntaha. He makes his final decision to put aside his father's fictitious secular Arabism and his doctoral studies in order to be a new man. He experiences a transformation of identity. He no longer considers himself, "Mustafa's son …. Not The child of corps dust. Not an academic. Not a member of the eternal Arab nation" (387). He rejects all the essential elements of his old masculinity. He sees himself as "Nur's son. Muntaha's husband" (387). It is after this stage that he moves toward religion as a new source of knowledge. An interesting decision made by Sami is the job he accepts to earn money. Whereas before his arrest, he had rejected the idea of having an alternative job to receiving a doctoral degree and being a university professor, now he has a radical change of mind and buys a taxi. The final scenes of the novel show him driving his taxi with "Muntaha *headscarfed* beside him" (382). He has turned into a new man. Sami is no longer the authorial teacher. He has come to terms with the idea of gender equality as a new way of life. He accepts that "the other path" of religion/Islam can be a way of dealing with life, though for now, though "trembling, contingent" (387).

9. Conclusion:

The Road from Damascus provides an opportunity to investigate the theory of constructed-ness of masculinity. Robin Yassin Kassab, sets his novel in a special temporal and spatial context. The main characters are positioned as immigrants in the

unfamiliar context where their identities are challenged by the new circumstances. It appears that the most contested aspect of the main characters' identity is their gender identity. More than any other character, it is the protagonist whose identity is subject to transformation. However, perhaps similar to many other men, he resists the change. The novel suggests that the most important conflict of the protagonist is his resistance against a change in the traditional masculinity defined for him. The novel portrays the conflict as he is caught in a contradictory situation trying to define masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, he, as a leader, aspires to encourage women towards "progressive" western life style by keeping them away from Islam. However, when these same women become determined to make their own choices, the same man resists their decision. The only resolution to this conflict is portrayed as the acceptance of a redefined masculinity—one shaped by both emerging forms of femininity and the evolving material and discursive context. An important theme of the novel centers around the idea that the femininity/masculinity binary and their associations are constructs, historically based, and inevitably subject to change. The novel can be examined to explore how with the advent of historical and material change, and the change in the meaning of masculinity, the fabricated binary between Arab secularism and Islam loses its significance for the main character. The novel suggests that any change is necessarily associated with the change in the signification of genders specially that of masculinity.

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AI Use Declaration

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