

Confronting the Right-Thinking Bourgeoisie: Shukri, Genet, and a Poetics of Inversion

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Al-sa'ada (Happiness), the only dramatic text by Muhammad Shukri (also spelled Mohamed Choukri) to ever appear in print, sat in a drawer for nearly ten years before it was published. Shukri completed the play on March 3, 1971; it was finally included in an issue of *Afaq* in 1980, while the literary magazine was under Mohammed Berrada's direction. In his 1994 introduction to the play, Muhammad al-Harradi notes that it was only after Shukri had become "a world writer," as his friends had begun to call him, that *Al-sa'ada* was able to see the light of day (3). He follows this with the assertion that among Moroccan authors writing in Arabic, the title of "world writer" remains Shukri's alone (3). This is not far off the mark. Moroccan literature in Arabic is on the margins of an already peripheral literature, following Itamar Even-Zohar's and Franco Moretti's analyses of the asymmetry of the world literary system. What does it mean, though, to read Shukri through the lens of world literature, that somewhat elusive term coined by Goethe in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century? David Damrosch focuses on a consideration of reception, and offers a definition of world literature that could potentially embrace all literary works that move beyond their home culture (4). For Damrosch, rather than a canon of texts, world literature is first and foremost a mode of circulation and reading: A work of world literature is any text that has an effective life within a literary system beyond that of its original context (3-4). Shukri's access to the global stage was almost exclusively mediated by his now famous autobiographical narrative *Al-khubz al-hafi* (translated into English as *For Bread Alone*), which, from the standpoint of circulation, is both a paradigmatic and anomalous example of a world literary text.

A double process allows for a text's entry to world literature: "first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (Damrosch 6). The work of world literature is, by definition, a site of negotiation between cultures, and it inevitably changes as it crosses borders. In Shukri's case, however, the process itself is turned on its head.

The very writing of *Al-khubz al-hafi* was prompted by Paul Bowles's request for Shukri's autobiography, and the text was read in translation outside of its local site of production for nearly a decade before the original entered the market. Published in English in 1973 and French in 1980, the Arabic version remained unpublished until 1982, when it was printed at the author's own expense. It was subsequently banned in Morocco a year later and only allowed to circulate freely in 2000 (Ettobi 211). The reversal of *Al-khubz al-hafi*'s entry into the literary market has made it particularly susceptible to the agendas of its translators and interpreters, an endemic issue in the transfer and reception of non-Western authors' work even in less vexed circumstances (Damrosch 24). Next to its censor at the American University in Cairo in 1998-1999, the politics of *Al-khubz al-hafi*'s translation and its appropriation by Western audiences as a representative of "third world literature" have been the most discussed aspects of Shukri's work.¹

While the various translations and corresponding receptions of *Al-khubz al-hafi* are important, Shukri's position as a "world writer" can be taken up from another angle. Rather than focus on the effect outside cultural influences have had on the English and French renditions of Shukri's work, we can think instead of the influence Western texts have had on the aesthetics of his Arabic compositions. In Even-Zohar's explanation of translated literature's position in the literary polysystem, he points to the role translations often play in introducing previously non-existent textual features into home literatures; elements borrowed from translated foreign works often lead to new "models of reality . . . compositional patterns and techniques" (242). In the case of Morocco, much of what Even-Zohar attributes to translated literature is equally applicable to the foreign literatures that have been in local circulation in their original languages since the colonial period. The prevalence of French throughout the country, and Spanish in the North, means that it is less a question of which texts were chosen for translation into Arabic than of which texts from the Spanish or French canon have been embraced by local authors writing in Arabic for their innovatory potential.

The literary environment of Shukri's Tangier was notoriously cosmopolitan; the city was a jointly administered international zone from 1923-1956, and the place where a number of well-known European and American writers converged. Drawn to an environment less restrictive than that of their home countries and the privilege that came with being a Westerner under a colonial administration, the city served as a source of inspiration for many: William Burroughs, Tennessee Williams,

Truman Capote, Allen Ginsberg, Paul and Jane Bowles, and Jean Genet, among others.² Despite the importance of Tangier for American Beat writers, Shukri's rhetorical strategies have less in common with these authors than with Genet. The often striking intersections within these two authors' texts demonstrate Even-Zohar's insight regarding the revolutionary potential of foreign literatures for local literary systems. Shukri's work needs to be read not just in light of its reception in translation, but in relation to the European literature, and Genet particularly, in circulation in Morocco that influenced his writing and expanded the limits of expression of Moroccan literature in Arabic.

A reading of *Al-sa'ada* in conjunction with *Al-khubz al-hafi* next to Genet's philosophy of political theater and *Journal du voleur* (*The Thief's Journal*) demonstrates that the structural similarities in Shukri's and Genet's works are not restricted to their autobiographical texts but cross genres. The two writers share an aesthetic that mines the violence to which both were subjected to create a textual and performative confrontation directed against the bourgeoisie. Both *Al-khubz al-hafi* and *Al-sa'ada* draw on the topoi found in Genet's work to upend the authority of contemporary intellectual, moral, and political conventions. *Al-khubz al-hafi* accomplishes this by introducing a Western mode of life writing into the Arabic autobiographical tradition while employing a localized variant of Genet's poetics of inversion. *Al-sa'ada* transfers this poetics to the stage and offers a satiric challenge through a carnivalesque world of permanently subverted values. Both texts, taken together, illustrate the necessity of contextualizing Shukri more broadly as a writer profoundly influenced by the larger world literary system, a writer whose adaptation of foreign tropes allowed him to significantly enrich his local literary tradition.

In his meditation on writing, *Ghiwayat al-shuhrur al-abyad* (*The Seduction of the White Blackbird*), Shukri aligns himself with Paul de Man's deconstruction of the prevailing generic distinction between fiction and autobiography. While Shukri effectively "declares himself the subject of his own understanding" in *Al-khubz al-hafi* through the equivalence of author and protagonist characteristic of traditional autobiography, he acknowledges the instability of the genre, its reliance on tropological substitutions (de Man 5). Unequivocally rejecting the notion that autobiography is dependent on the transcription of a verifiable reality, he writes:

We don't write so that we might set down a clear, complete picture absolutely faithful to the original, even when we seek to write our autobiographies. Sounds and mean-

ings, movements and situations, that we found in some moment—lived or imagined—are not exactly themselves when we artistically recall them. (*Ghiwayat* 310)³

Shukri's use of an autonomous genre indication of original coinage —the term “novelistic autobiography (*sira dhatiyya riwa'iyya*)” placed directly under the title of *Al-khubz al-hafi*—attaches this position to the text itself. The complication of the truth/fiction binary is characteristic of both Shukri and Genet, each of whose texts undermine the idea that autobiography reveals accurate self-knowledge, directing the texts' objectives elsewhere. Genet, for his part, punctuates *Journal* with direct statements to the same effect: “Was what I wrote true? False? Only this book of love will be real. What of the facts that served as its pretext? I must be their repository. It is not they that I am restoring” (100).

Despite the illusion that autobiography is a simpler, more direct mode of representation than fiction, the autobiographical text, particularly for Shukri and Genet, is less the product of direct mimesis than a carefully chosen system of rhetoric and figures. Shukri's choices in this regard place *Al-khubz al-hafi* at odds with the Arabic autobiographical tradition, instead carrying the traces of a Western model of autobiography initiated with Rousseau. In the introduction to her memoir *Ruju' ila-l-tufula* (*Return to Childhood*), Moroccan novelist Layla Abu Zayd writes that Arabic autobiography in Morocco is an imported genre, despite texts like al-Tuhami al-Wazzani's *Al-zawiya* (1942) that have clear connections to the pre-modern tradition of self-narrative (4). What Abu Zayd is referring to is not autobiography as such, but a paradigm of autobiography based in confession; the conviction that the innermost self must be revealed and that this can only occur through absolute exposure. This is an eighteenth-century conception of the genre; even Augustine's *Confessions* were confessional only to the degree that they supported the gravity of his conversion to Christianity. It is not until Rousseau's *Confessions* that the current standard takes hold. Rousseau's opening paragraphs summarize this new mode of self-narrative:

I will say boldly: “Here is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was. I have told the good and the bad with equal frankness. I have concealed nothing that was ill. . . . I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and vile when that is how I was . . . let them hear my confessions . . . let them blush at my wretchedness.” (5)

Abu Zayd is correct that the revelation of the “contemptible,” the “vile,” and one’s own “wretchedness” in the autobiographical text is alien to the Arabic tradition. Her reference to the religious injunction, “*Allah amara bi-l-satr*,” a phrase expressing God’s command to conceal the shameful and embarrassing (*‘ayb wa ‘ar*), conveys the antithetical nature of the modern genre to the tradition’s sensibilities (3). Shukri does not write within the norms of traditional Arabic autobiography; in his own words, with *Al-khubz al-hafi* he strove to “merge the indictment and the confession,” squarely situating his text in the Western tradition (“Being and Place” 222).

Between indictment and confession is an apt description of a space negotiated by both Shukri and Genet. The resemblances between their autobiographical narratives have been remarked upon frequently, if little analyzed in depth. Joseph Massad, for example, writes that *Al-khubz al-hafi* is “immediately reminiscent of (and clearly influenced by) Jean Genet’s *Journal du voleur*” (314). The most striking themes linking the two texts are the peripatetic vagabond lives of the narrators/protagonists, the violence of their societal marginalization, their unabashed criminality, and their often deviant sexuality. Descriptions of theft, begging, acts of homosexuality, scenes revealing polymorphous desires where a range of objects hold the potential for sexual gratification, and frank depictions of prostitution comprise the most notorious moments of both *Al-khubz al-hafi* and *Journal du voleur*. Shukri’s and Genet’s narrators share traits with the “abject hero” in Michael André Bernstein’s use of the term, and through the very marginality of their positions they extend the promise that by following the sordid details of their lives, the reader will have access to a truth hidden from the dominant culture (33).

The texts’ power is embedded in their narrators’ reversal of societal norms and the way this inversion works to reveal concealed forms of violence. This is a textual paradigm with a long history in the Western tradition, traceable from Horace to Diderot, through Céline and Dostoevsky (Bernstein 16).⁴ What is unique to Shukri and Genet equally is that while amorality becomes a source of liberation, their works never exhibit the complete moral blindness common to the archetype. The specific variants of the model of inversion each utilizes are connected to the moral and psychological categories that are part and parcel of the value systems of their individual contexts. Shukri’s work, then, becomes less an imitation than a startling adaptation, wholly original in its localized point of reception.

Al-khubz al-hafi covers the narrator's journey from the impoverished Rif through Tangier, Tetouan, and Oran in the years leading up to independence. At the end of the text, the narrator is eighteen years old and, never having attended school, has just made the decision to learn how to read. It is generally most valued for its documentation of extreme poverty, an example of subaltern experience rare in a literary text. As Sabry Hafez has remarked in regard to *Al-khubz al-hafi*, "there is no text in modern Arabic literature more audacious in its violation of linguistic, social, and sexual taboos" (223). Hafez's response articulated in the superlative is to Shukri's adoption of Genet's poetics founded on the subversion of convention, which Shukri effectively adjusts to the norms of Moroccan society. It is this device that he utilizes so thoroughly to call socially constituted discourses of authority into question. The adaptation of a poetics of inversion requires, in tandem, the familiarity with a tradition's literary conventions and a society's codes of a range of public discourses. Shukri's manipulation of these overlapping fields is evident throughout the text, but his treatment of the figure of the father can demonstrate his method with clarity.

The narrative's rejection of contemporary Moroccan traditions and mores is, in large part, strategically crafted through the narrator's relationship with his father, whose virulent masculinity—against which the protagonist rebels—carries the dual signification of patriarch and conventional society at large. Hafez likewise notes: "The narrator's relationship with his father . . . burns with hatred; the desire to kill the father is not just Freudian in its implication, but exists at the societal, civilizational, and personal levels together" (224). The primacy of the father-son relationship in Moroccan culture—the obligatory submission and obedience the son pays to the father—is a dynamic so pervasive that its replication has been shown to permeate society from the familial to the religious and political spheres (Hammoudi 139–40). In his study of the text's Arabic and French translations, Mustapha Ettobi similarly comments on the extreme moral power, essentially religious in nature, conventionally bestowed on the father's authority in Morocco (217). Shukri utilizes the potency of the father image by structuring the text around a tension between the ideal of a patriarchal authority who demands deference and the total corruption of that authority which renders any acquiescence impossible. Shukri's resolution of this tension is the discursive renunciation of the father figure and everything to which he is analogically connected.

The reader encounters the shockingly blunt description of the murder of 'Abd al-Qadir, the narrator's younger brother, at the hands

of his father within the narrative's first pages, immediately after the family's arrival in Tangier, having just fled the famine in the Rif. Consequently, the impotency of the father's authority is accomplished at the commencement of the narrative. It is this first recognition of his father's moral degradation that leads the narrator to repudiate all proceeding forms of authority, a rejection he begins to extend to others representative of more abstract systems of domination and subjugation as early as the burial of his brother:

To ease my intense hatred of my father I began to cry again. I was afraid he would kill me like he killed my brother. He scolded me in a low, menacing voice: "Won't you stop crying?"

The shaykh said, "Yes, enough crying. Your brother is with God. He's with the angels now."

I also hate the one who buried my brother. (13)

The narrator's rancor passes seamlessly from father to shaykh; the evocative religious symbol is assimilated with the father as an object of contempt to whom the narrator internally refuses obeisance. In a later passage, the connection between the father and the most elevated figures of religious authority is established explicitly. The following dialogue between father and son, of which the son's portion remains unvoiced, still beyond the limits of what can be said, is a direct confrontation with the symbolic heart of religious and political power. The narrator's father begins:

"I know that you hate me. You wish I were dead."

(I thought: Ah! You've begun to say something reasonable.)

"You love her. You only love her."

(I thought: Her, I don't hate. But you, who in this world loves you?)

"I see the love in both your eyes. She cuddles you like you're still a suckling. Her milk is still between your molars. She's your mother. But I'm your father. If there's anyone you have to obey, it's me. No one but me. Obedience belongs to me alone as long as I'm alive. Do you hear me?"

(I hear you, O *Khalifa* [Caliph] of God on His earth ruled by fathers like you.)

“Speaking to you is useless. You act like I’m not here even when I am. Do you hear me, you wretch?”
(I hear you, O *wali*⁵ of God.)
“You’re nothing but a child biting at your mother’s breast.” (80)

By equating his father here with the *Khalifa* of God—a reference to the Caliphate with intimations in Morocco that reverberate all the more deeply—immediately following thoughts of patricide, Shukri implicates the core of his culture’s values.⁶ The critique is extended further still as the narrator follows “O *Khalifa* of God” with the qualifier “on His earth ruled by fathers like you” (*fi ardihi allati yahkumuha ’aba’ mithlak*). The entire ruling class is figured as commensurate with the brutal patriarchy his father represents and he dismisses their collective authority.

The narrator’s negation of traditional authority leads him to embrace its opposite. Like Genet, he aligns himself with a subterranean world of beggars, thieves, smugglers, and prostitutes, a collusion founded on the awareness of the exploitation enacted by those in power. His justification, once again, begins with the father and arches outward:

[My father] exploits us, my mother and me. The owner of the café exploits me because there are servers in the café who get more than my wages. I’ll steal from whoever exploits me, even if it’s my mother or father. This is how I began to consider theft legitimate when it comes to the morally corrupt [*halal ma’a awlad al-haram*]. (27)

Unable to change his circumstances through society’s existing institutions, his opposition and challenge to entrenched forms of oppression take the form of the validation of all that society condemns. The illicit must be transformed into the legitimate, and it has a notably broader scope than theft where the economic justice is patent. In Oran, after the narrator sodomizes a young boy in a wheat field, his aunt implores him: “Don’t do everything that’s vile [*qabih*],” to which he responds, “But I love everything that’s delightfully vile” (60). Society’s overall values thus proven fraudulent, behavior considered debased by its rules is sanctioned in the text. The goal of this is not, as Shukri has explained, the depiction of characters who are content with their immorality, but an aesthetic strategy meant to uncover the violent forces to which they are exposed (“Being and Place” 223).

It is in this creation of an anti-world of inverted values that Shukri reveals his affinity with Genet, the substantive differences between their autobiographical texts a necessary result of the considerable differences in their respective societies. Genet is widely known for writing what has been called the most complete program of inversion since the Marquis de Sade (Nachman 359). *Journal du voleur* covers his life from 1932 to 1940, as he traveled through Spain and Antwerp, surviving primarily as a beggar and a thief. He defines the book's themes himself as "betrayal, theft, and homosexuality" (171). While both texts offer a rejection of their societies' value systems, Shukri's challenge is to a form of morality that is always directly or indirectly linked to economic or social oppression; conversely, Genet's preoccupation is strictly with the bourgeois propriety at the root of his own marginalization. This contrast gets to the root of the kind of violence that marks each of the texts. Part of the appeal of inversion as an aesthetic strategy is that it is a highly malleable form capable of addressing the varying types of symbolic and systemic violence that shaped Shukri's and Genet's lives, and to which their texts stand as correctives.

Slavoj Žižek has parsed the different forms of violence symptomatic of modernity—the symbolic violence of the generally unnoticed (and partly unconscious) domination that everyday social habits maintain over the conscious subject; the systemic violence resulting from our larger economic and political systems; and, the plainly visible subjective violence of the acts of crime and terror performed by clearly identifiable agents (1–39). The symbolic violence to which Genet was subjected led him to form a particular worldview cohesive throughout all of his work. His status as a foundling at a time when it carried great social stigma gave him an identity associated with guilt from its inception. His very birth "coincides with a gesture of rejection," as Sartre puts it, and his homosexuality, then still illegal in France, compounded his sense of exclusion (8). Born in Paris but transplanted to the countryside with its strict codes of morality, his early sense of self was defined by an exaggerated reaction to a petty juvenile theft carried out at the age of ten. Raised in an ethical system that damned him, in his writing, Genet takes the common standards of society and "inverts the ideals of the ordinary world" (Nachman 359). He writes in *Journal*:

I slowly forced myself to consider that wretched life as a deliberate necessity. Never did I try to make of it something other than what it was, I did not try to adorn it, to

mask it, but on the contrary, I wanted to affirm it in its exact sordidness, and the most sordid signs became for me signs of grandeur. (19)

Signs of abjection are given a noble aspect. This is not a wholly unique response to injustice. At work here is the same impulse that often obliges the powerless to adopt the identities imposed upon them, to turn these same reductive categories against their oppressors as a form of revolt and path to dignity. For Genet, it is an utterly conscious rehabilitation designed as a confrontation to the conformist reader who subscribes to the banal moral vision that has been the cause of his suffering:

Without thinking myself magnificently born, the uncertainty of my origin allowed me to interpret it. I added to it the peculiarity of my misfortunes, abandoned by my family, I already felt it was natural to aggravate this condition by a preference for boys, and this preference by theft, and theft by crime or a complacent attitude in regard to crime. I thus resolutely rejected a world which had rejected me. (87)

Genet counters society's rejection with a rejection of his own. He writes that his life is "the life of vermin," and this is what he sets out to describe in stunningly lyrical prose (18). It is a reaction against assimilated norms to which he could not measure up, a response to the symbolic forms of violence that defined him. The portrait offered in the text has the reader's discomfort as one of its central aims: "Using only the pride imposed by poverty, we aroused pity by cultivating the most repulsive wounds. We became a reproach to your happiness" (55).

The poetics of inversion utilized by both *Al-khubz al-hafi* and *Journal du voleur* contains within it a vital function: the revelation of the symbolic and systemic forms of violence—what Žižek jointly terms "objective" violence—of Shukri's and Genet's respective societies. Necessary to the maintenance of the status quo, these generally hidden forms of suppression are often behind the "irrational" explosions of subjective violence that make little sense when the former is left out of the equation. They are the disruptions of the quotidian, the breaks in the normal functioning of things, and in Shukri's and Genet's texts these moments ultimately serve to make the larger patterns of objective violence visible. The rape in the wheat field that prompts *Al-khubz al-hafi*'s narrator to declare his preference for everything "vile" is one of the more extreme instances of violence he performs:

Violently, I held him by the hand. My body trembled. Madness in my head. He forcefully pulled his hand away and stood up. He wanted to escape. I hugged his legs and powerfully, crazily pulled him under me. . . . “I’ll tell my mother. I’ll tell my father and mother. I’ll tell . . .” Mothers of the world. Fathers of the world. At times he bites my hand, at others he bites the earth. Two bodies in one. He scratches me. I bite him on his knee. He stops screaming and shaking. My warmth settles into his warmth. (59)

Genet’s recurring homoerotic descriptions canonize non-heteronormative sex, a retort to the severe restrictions placed on his own sexuality, then considered a crime in France. In *Al-khubz al-hafi*, the significance of this scene of violent homosexual encounter can be located in both past events and the lines that follow. After seeing his aunt kiss the head of the violated boy’s mother in a gesture of apology, the narrator thinks to himself: “*Jasadi, tfu!* (My body, disgusting!)” (60). His revulsion toward the needs and desires of a body over which he has little control is expressed in this clipped expression. And Shukri’s criticism of sexual repression in traditional Arab society is implied within this. A moment after he registers his own disgust, the narrator responds to his aunt’s reprimand: “In Tetouan, I had the thighs of the prostitutes at the bordello. Here, should I lust after your thighs? Monique’s thighs belong to her husband. Your thighs belong to your husband. And me?” (60). All the instances of the narrator’s deviant sexual behavior, including the assault, is the result, for Shukri, of a society that systematically fails to provide a space for the individual to understand and develop his or her sexuality. The narrator points to the absence of any other vehicle through which he can gratify his needs, though notably the only alternative he can imagine is that of the brothel. Shukri states elsewhere: “Our society, which does not provide us with a healthy sexual education, multiplies the possibilities of chronic deviations” (“Being and Place” 227).

Beyond its reference to a far-reaching form of societal oppression, the moment of assault recalls earlier moments in the narrative, evoking the violence linked to the severe poverty of the narrator’s childhood. His first exposure to sex is to witness his parents in the single room in which they all live: “Panting. Kisses. Groans. Panting. Kisses. Panting. Kisses. Groans. They’re biting each other. They’re eating each other. They’re licking each other’s blood. . . . He’s stabbing her. A long deep groan. A sigh. He’s killed her” (25). Having only ever experienced his father’s

savagery, his initial interpretation of the sexual act is filtered through an equally violent lens. With the young boy in Oran, he reenacts this event. Traumas are prone to repetition; they recur unremittingly through the acts of the survivor (Caruth 2). With the association between past and present, the reader gains an awareness of some of the less tangible consequences of the narrator's deprivation. Having forged an early correlation between sex and violence, confronted with the complete absence of outside guidance, the narrator submits to his basest physical urges. In a gesture of imitation, he usurps the role played by his father.

This scene and others like it are crucial to Shukri's role as a world writer in more than one sense. In his discussion of novels in the world literary market, Moretti contends that the central mechanism at play in the unity of world literature is diffusion, where powerful literatures from the core—in the case of Morocco, the West—interfere with the autonomous development of literatures from the periphery, whereas the reverse almost never occurs (70–71). The effect of this interference tends to have a specific character: Plots are retained while style is markedly transformed (73). In the case of Shukri and Genet, this model would seem to hold. While Shukri has referenced his reading of Genet's work in a number of texts and interviews, when he asked Genet what he had read of Arabic literature, the conversation, as Shukri recorded it, is telling:⁷

“Have you read any Arab writers?”

“No, unfortunately, I've only read some of Kateb Yacine's work. He's a friend of mine.”

To be sure, I added: “You haven't even read anything by Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim?”

“Who are they?”

“Two Egyptian writers. Some of their work has been translated into French and other languages.”

“Unfortunately, I don't know them. Hopefully I'll read something of theirs one day.” (“Jan Jineih” 141)

It was not a reciprocal exchange between the two writers, even in respect to their local literary contexts, but a one-way transmission. This is reflective of the hierarchy of circulation and influence. The principle of diffusion central to world literature can be taken positively or negatively. Moretti views its effect in terms of the limits it places on the writer's imagination, constrained by the forms circulating in the world market (71). Even-Zohar's reading leaves more room for optimism, noting that leading

writers will often draw on foreign works for new models of reality to good effect, replacing those no longer viable (242). As a case study, Shukri supports the positive aspects of Even-Zohar's position. In Western literature, he found a vehicle that was essential to his identity as a writer. He himself writes: "Due to my rebellious nature in the face of everything that is static or corrupt, or tamed, I found freedom of expression in the way Western literature treated problems of Being" ("Being and Place" 225).

Diffusion in regard to Shukri and Genet not only relates to the transmission of form—of Shukri's adoption of Genet's poetics of inversion—but to the language of *Al-khubz al-hafi*. Moretti's finding that in the journey of narrative models from the center to the periphery, plots survive intact while style is transformed is equally relevant (74). Hafez astutely points out that even *Al-khubz al-hafi*'s title, literally "naked or bare bread," is more than a signifier of the narrator's life of privation; it is symbolic of Shukri's writing itself, a writing radically stripped of the ornamentation characteristic of the Arabic literary tradition (226). By plainly and directly describing things as they are, Shukri breaks with the conventions of his literary predecessors. He also breaks with Genet.

Genet is a "verbalist"; his thorough mastery of classical and vernacular French is the most widely admired feature of his writing (Wilcocks 785). In *Journal*, he writes: "My life must be a legend, in other words legible, and the reading of it must give birth to a certain new emotion which I will call poetry" (119). The disjuncture between the "life of vermin" he writes and the elevated language in which he writes it is his work's most distinctive feature. His intention is to "set poverty up as a virtue," and it is not just poverty but abjection, criminality, and homosexuality that he reinscribes as virtues through the highly poetic language of his discourse (176). In this, Shukri is Genet's opposite. While Genet works within an opposition in which he writes the clandestine spaces of criminality with a deliberate and masterful eloquence, Shukri defies tradition, writing experiences considered unsuitable for a literary project in a language utterly bereft of adornment. In *Zaman al-akhta'* (Age of Errors), he writes the following about Muhammad Sabbagh, the established Moroccan writer he approaches as a mentor:

But we weren't cut from the same cloth. He hadn't scavenged in the garbage of the wealthy. He hadn't been lice-infested, his hamstrings torn, bloody. I don't know how to write about the milk of sparrows, the intimate embrace of angelic beauty. (283)

Moretti uses the metaphor of a literary work's passing through two sieves, narrative and linguistic (75). The narrative retains its shape while the linguistic register is radically altered, replaced by a local solution. High literary language adds shock value to Genet's text; for Shukri—writing in Arabic—the same effect could only have been achieved through sparse physiological description. Sex, in particular, is chronicled in frank biological terms. To return to the same scene of rape described earlier, after pinning the boy down, the narrator continues: "I massage his organ with my hand. His thing becomes erect in my hand. It takes its pleasure. I kiss his knee, his hair, his face, his mouth" (59). There is no allusion or insinuation; the style is clinical reportage. One of the main contradictions in the "amalgamation of different traditions" that is world literature is the way the new style that replaces the old acts as a counterpoint to the original story and the political tension that often arises as a result (Moretti 75). The reaction against Shukri's text in its local context is not just a response to its content, but to its direct language, the plain uncovering of that which should, by the standards of traditional sensibilities, be covered, at the very least by metaphorical allusive language.

While Shukri's and Genet's autobiographical texts treat the response of an individual—the author-narrator—to systemic and symbolic violence, their dramatic texts move toward "a social and political ethos of collective revolt" (Finburgh 79). Shukri was not, first and foremost, a playwright, while Genet was one of the most important dramatists of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there is an analogous politics at play in the dramatic strategies of the two writers, a similar shift from the methods employed in their prose. Shukri's little-discussed play illustrates the diversity of his literary output and the scope of his affinity with Genet, which is often thought to exist exclusively between their autobiographical texts.

Though it continues to employ a logic of inversion, Genet's theater is, in some ways, diametrically opposed to his narratives. It generally takes the form of ceremony, categorically rejecting psychological character study, which he terms "puerile masquerade" (Bradby and Finburgh 40). The actor should essentially be a metaphor for what he or she represents. Unlike his narrative texts, it does not operate through the glorification of those outside society's moral code. Instead, it aims to show the interdependent relationships of those in power and the marginalized. It seeks "to confront the right-thinking bourgeoisie," as Sartre called them, with the reality of the reciprocal nature of their rela-

tionship with the oppressed, shocking them into a realization of their own complicity in the condition of those they condemn (Bradby and Finburgh 38). The role of representation is not to achieve verisimilitude or the faithful imitation of reality. Instead the actors are “signs,” a reflective surface that allows for the projection of the audience’s preconceived images. Through this reflection, the audience should become aware of “the exaggerations and distortions” of its constructed images, both of itself as it would like to be seen and its image of the subjects of its exploitation (Bradby and Finburgh 35).

Two of Genet’s most famous plays, *Les bonnes* (*The Maids*) and *Les nègres* (translated more innocuously as *The Blacks*), are good illustrations of this point. In *Les bonnes*, Solange and Claire are two housemaids who construct elaborate rituals when their mistress, simply called Madame, is away. The focus of their role-playing is the murder of Madame and they take turns portraying both sides of the power divide. In *Les nègres*, a troupe of black actors enacts the ritualistic murder of a white woman of which they have been accused before a jury of black actors wearing white masks. The important thing to note is that the figures of the maids and mistresses in *Les bonnes* and those of blacks in *Les nègres* do not represent the reality of the specific forms of servility and subjection of which domestic servants or African Americans have been the victims; rather, these figures represent the image of these subordinate groups that already exist in the minds of Genet’s audience (Bradby and Finburgh 42). Through this strategy, he endeavors to “transform and subvert images of reality” (42).

Shukri’s play *Al-sa’ada* shares Genet’s concern for his theoretical audience’s complicity in the perpetuation of entrenched unjust social hierarchies and utilizes a comparable mechanism of audience projection to convey its message; it has, however, never been performed on stage. The play is set in Tangier at an unspecified time, in a metaphorical future. It is a world of inversion, not in the sense of *Al-khubz al-hafi* which is tied to the genre of autobiography, but in the Saturnalian style of the world-upside-down prints popular among the lower classes in Europe in the sixteenth century, where all normal hierarchies are inverted: “mice ate cats, children spanked parents, the hare snared the hunter, the cart pulled the horse, fishermen were pulled from the water by fish . . . the poor gave alms to the rich” etc. (Scott 167). It carries all the primary characteristics of the carnivalesque, and Shukri’s choice of genre is both shrewd and necessary; *Al-sa’ada* is

spectacle, the performed suspension of all hierarchical ranks and prohibitions. It is as if the ritualistic role-play enacted by Solange and Claire in Genet's *Les bonnes* had been made reality.

As *Al-sa'ada* opens, it is the initial stage of a new era (*al-'ahd al-jadid*) in which servants and workers hold the reigns of power: "The salaries of servants and workers are more than the salaries of professors, more than the salaries of engineers" (14). It is not only social hierarchies that have been turned upside down, the societal norms that govern sexual relations have likewise been completely effaced. Sex has little do with marriage and all the characters without exception take pride in their complete sexual freedom. Like the carnival, it is a world liberated from the established order in every sense (Bakhtin 10). Yet, unlike Bakhtin's reading of the carnivalesque that focuses on the event's power of regeneration, *Al-sa'ada* reveals its "bitter side, the relationship between its celebratory and rage filled aspects," to ultimately confront its audience with their own role in the utopian yearnings of the marginalized that hold little chance of fulfillment (Bernstein 6).

Events unfold around 'Abid, the wealthy character from the upper classes (at least during the old era [*al-'ahd al-qadim*]). It is primarily through his character that we come to understand the societal changes that have recently taken place. The play opens as he sits in his apartment, set with "opulent furniture, a television, newspapers and magazines on the table" (13). He sorts through piles of newspapers desperately trying to find a servant. Workers have become a scarce commodity as companies go bankrupt due to their inability to find laborers to perform the mundane tasks they require. 'Abid comments that, "The prophesy of a major world change has been realized" (14).

The first third of the play is primarily dialogue among 'Abid, his wife Layla, daughter Wasila, and sister Dunya, with 'Abid lamenting the difficulty of finding "help" in the new era. The position of what have traditionally been the lower classes is described in increasingly absurd terms. A conversation between 'Abid and his wife Layla shows the play's dark humor:

Layla: Zina Balashi's servant has a friend who's a graduate of the Advanced School of Home Economics.

'Abid: That's fantastic.

Layla: But she's worse.

'Abid: What's wrong with her?

Layla: Uppity. Very uppity.
 ‘Abid: We’ll be good to her if she wants to work for us.
 Imagine, we could have a servant with a diploma
 in home economics.
 Layla: But she’s very uppity. Uppity to the point that you
 feel like vomiting. Imagine, to have a servant like
 her who belittles us and belittles our guests.
 ‘Abid: What do you want, this is their new character.
 This is their epoch, our epoch is dying and theirs
 is growing.
 Layla: She also has a servant, a partially trained cook.
 ‘Abid: (amazed) A servant? She also has a servant?
 Layla: Yes, she has a servant partially trained in cooking.
 But she’s worse than her mistress. Imagine, to have
 two bad servants.
 ‘Abid: Is she married?
 Layla: No. She’s free. She sends her servant to fill in for
 her when she’s sick or traveling. (18)

Shortly thereafter, the voice on the radio echoes, “The workers will have a new era that they have never previously...” before it cuts off (24). Much like the world-upside-down prints mentioned above, the situation described is extreme to the degree that it garners a certain ambiguity. The new set of social relations presented is indeed preposterous. Yet, whenever a social classification is manipulated imaginatively, we are forced to remember its arbitrariness, that there is nothing natural about the current class structure that we regularly take for granted (Scott 168). Dominant groups remain in power, in part because social distinctions are naturalized as inevitable categories; the destabilization of these categories performs an important imaginative function.

‘Abid repeatedly insists that if he were lucky enough to find a servant, he would treat her well (the word servant is always gendered here in the feminine). He declares that he has come to terms with the way in which power has shifted, though his retention of the old ideology is clear. In several conversations with his girlfriend Amal, he reveals his position. In one instance, Amal tells him: “The students will strike tomorrow,” and ‘Abid replies: “They’ll also participate in digging the new graves” (32). In another, his nostalgia is made explicit:

Amal: There are plenty of workers but they're contemptuous of their bosses. It's enough for one of them to work two or three days to not need to work the rest of the week. The high pay has spoiled them.

'Abid: In the age of unemployment they worshiped work to the letter. When one of them would find work, he would stay up all night with insomnia, afraid that the boss would fire him. Today, it's the boss who's afflicted with insomnia, afraid that the workers won't show up. They didn't have time to protest or disrespect the work or the pay. We would say about them: "They're the salt of the earth." It was enough for there to be a new task for them to take it up with enthusiasm and obedience. They didn't think of the reasons behind the fact that they were the workers and others were the bosses. (33-34)

'Abid clings to the appearance of subordinate consent that characterized the highly stratified society that has since been overturned. Like in Genet's plays, the characters here are one-dimensional types; they are symbolic signs intended to represent something larger. Similar to Genet, Shukri constructs a dream society with a function not unlike a revenge fantasy where the domination of the elite is negated. 'Abid's reaction to the reversal is typical of a dominant group's response when those they oppress reject the status that has been imposed upon them.

Since the play is voiced through the former members of the ruling class, it risks interpretation as a reactionary work that supports the position it in fact parodies. There is, however, a noteworthy moment in *Al-sa'ada*—an intertextual allusion to a scene in *Al-khubz al-hafi*—that would make such a reading impossible.⁸ In *Al-khubz al-hafi*, directly before the narrator and his friend decide to go to a brothel, they have the following conversation:

I met my friend Tafersiti. He was down. He said:

"My uncle died."

"Poor guy."

"He killed himself, his wife, and his three children."

"How did that happen? Why?"

"They went days without food. He and his wife didn't

want to ask the neighbors for something to keep them going. They built another door of stone and clay on the inside of the house and died.” (37)

While not a direct equivalence, there is a dialogue between ‘Abid and Amal that is strikingly reminiscent of the above exchange:

Amal: Yesterday I finished reading a novel about the life of a family that committed suicide together by gas. The husband, the protagonist, went three months without finding work. That was the reason for the collective suicide.

‘Abid: A time with that kind of misery and wretchedness only exists in old books. Today it’s those who own things that commit suicide not those who don’t. (34)

For ‘Abid, who stands in for the economic elite, the poverty and desperation documented by Shukri in his autobiography are the stuff of fiction. There is no room for a text like *Al-khubz al-hafi* in his discourse, which can only ever consist of a partial narrative that supports the continuation of his privileged position.

This, in the end, is a modern Saturnalia far removed from “the idealized image of a boisterous medieval fair,” highlighting instead the resentment that may have always marked the sanctioned inversions of carnival (Bernstein 23). ‘Abid’s fate in *Al-sa‘ada* is precarious. He is kidnapped, as increasingly large numbers of the former ruling classes are, and though he marginally escapes death, the final scene shows a portentous knock at the door with him looking in its direction apprehensively. The servants and workers have had their revenge, and it would seem that they have failed to create an era better than that which preceded this one. Their perspective, however, is absent from the play; they are primarily an ominous presence, occasionally caricatured. When ‘Abid finally succeeds in obtaining a servant, she leaves work early to attend exclusive parties, ultimately departing for Paris with her boyfriend.

In Sartre’s exhaustive study of Genet, he notes in regard to *Les bonnes*:

They *hate* Madame. Translate: Genet detests the Society that rejects him and wishes to annihilate it. These specters are born of the dream of the master; murky to themselves, their feelings come to them from outside. They are born in the

sleeping imagination of Madame or Monsieur. . . . When he presents them before the footlights, Genet merely mirrors the fantasies of the right-minded women in the audience. Every evening five hundred Madames can sing out “Yes, that’s what maids are like,” without realizing that they have created them, the way Southerners create Negroes. (617)

Much like Genet, Shukri presents a world in which the underclasses have gained equality and the result represents the deepest fears of the ruling classes. Little more than specters in the play itself, the servants and workers are the reflections of images already latent in the minds of his hypothetical audience.⁹ Through *Al-sa’ada*’s performance, however, Shukri could hope to achieve the transformation of reality through his audience’s confrontation with the artificial nature of the class system from which it benefits.

Whether the genre is autobiography or performed carnivalesque parody, Shukri’s adoption of a poetics of inversion enables his expression of urgently needed social critique in a form inextricably connected to his position as a world writer. This article hopes to point to the work that remains to be done on an author who has yet to be discussed with the full attention he deserves. Shukri was more than a chronicler of desperate poverty whose life circumstances supplied him with autobiographical material. A shift in focus to the interplay of Shukri’s work with the world literary texts with which he was actively in dialogue holds the potential to deepen our understanding of the internal aesthetic mechanisms at work not only in *Al-khubz al-hafi*, but in the extensive body of his prose that waits to be discussed. Our appreciation of a writer who continues to spark controversy precisely because he expanded the possibilities of what could be said in his home context is only likely to grow as a result.

Notes

* I would like to thank the students of my undergraduate seminar on the Arabic novel in World Literature and graduate seminar on Arabic autobiography at Berkeley for the many discussions that contributed to the ideas in this article.

¹ On the issue of the text’s translation, see Tanoukhi and Ettobi. And for a detailed account of its censor at the American University in Cairo, see Mehrez 229-275.

- ² Several books cover the literary scene in Tangier during the international zone in detail. Shukri gives his own account in three separate volumes: *Jean Genet in Tangier*, *Tennessee Williams in Tangier*, and *Paul Bowles in Tangier*. Michelle Green's *The Dream at the End of the World* provides a good overview.
- ³ All translations from Shukri, except for "Being and Place," are mine.
- ⁴ It could be argued that similar paradigms exist in the Arabic tradition, such as the figure of the *su'luk* (rogue). While this is true, I hope to show that Shukri's influences can be found elsewhere.
- ⁵ The term *wali* has a special significance in Morocco due to the widespread presence of Sufism. A *wali* of God is roughly equivalent to a Muslim saint, the *wali* being a special friend of God able to protect or intercede for people with Him.
- ⁶ The roughly equivalent, officially sanctified, title of *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful) has been the property of the Moroccan ruler since the precolonial period, remaining in usage to the present day. The highest political authority's legitimacy is based in religion and above reproach.
- ⁷ Shukri has explicitly referenced his "reading" of Genet, presumably in French. Tahar Ben Jelloun, however, has recently asserted that he more likely heard descriptions of Genet's work from Brion Gysin, as Genet had not yet been translated into Arabic when the two knew each other in Tangier. Despite Ben Jelloun's implication that Shukri's French would not have been up to the challenge of Genet in the original, he nevertheless refers to Shukri as Genet's disciple, stating that for Shukri, Genet was "at once a double and a father" (35).
- ⁸ This scene is significantly absent from the English translation of the text.
- ⁹ And they would not be entirely unjustified. History is filled with examples of enacted revenge fantasies during times of open rebellion. Scott, for example, cites an example from the Peasants' War in which a peasant leader "dressed a countess up like a beggar and sent her off in a dung cart" while "knights, now in rags, were obliged to serve their vassals at table while peasants dressed up in knightly garb and mocked their noble rituals" (171).

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