

# From the Unsayable to Engineered Confession: The Sexual Taboo in Modern Arabic Fiction (1980–2015)

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## Abstract

*This article conceptualizes the “unsayable” not as a fixed prohibition but as a dynamic dispositive that structures confession across paratexts, spaces, voices, and regimes of the gaze. It proposes a replicable analytic matrix aligning a mediation axis — ellipsis → avowal → mise en scène — with a contextual vector comprising the institutional eye, spatial configuration, vocal modality, and narrative tempo. The study applies scene-level coding to seven modern Arabic novels and engages in a calibrated counter-comparison with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* to broaden the comparative scope. The analysis demonstrates that degrees of disclosure depend less on authorial boldness than on the nature of the surveilling eye — symbolic, communal, or procedural — and the permeability of its spatial membrane (sacred/urban; closed/open). The findings show how legal, religious, and market institutions modulate confessional discourse, and how literary texts convert taboo into an aesthetic architecture that redistributes voice, visibility, and agency for both artistic and political purposes.*

**Keywords:** sexual taboo; engineered confession; narrative spatiality; paratext and censorship; ethical focalization; modern Arabic fiction

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

This study proceeds from a methodological suspicion toward the “repression hypothesis” and treats sexual taboo as an engine of form rather than a topic of scandal. In Michel Foucault’s account, confession is a technology that binds truth to procedures and bodies; power does not merely silence speech about sexuality but proliferates it through rule-bound channels (Foucault, 1978, pp. 17–35, 58–61, 152). Mary Douglas teaches that purity/impurity is a system of boundaries, not essences — “dirt is matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966, p. 44) — so that spaces and objects function as moral membranes. We integrate these insights with a selective Lacanian attention to lack and the *objet petit a* — those luminous points (scar, gaze, window) around which desire circulates without consummation (Lacan, 1977, pp. 96, 181). In the Arabic novel since the 1980s, this triad — procedure, boundary, lack — often replaces thematic content as the principal driver of the sexual scene. The claim is not that censorship simply represses; rather, institutional devices (clerical authority, family honor, law, market, and publishing paratext) generate the very forms by which bodies can be spoken and seen.

### From repression to form: locating the debate

The modern theoretical conversation about sexuality and narrative has tended to crystallize around four nodes. First, confessional procedures: Foucault’s analysis of the confessional apparatus foregrounds how truth is produced under institutionalized gazes and through codified speech acts

(Foucault, 1978, pp. 58–61). Second, public intimacy: Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner show that publics are organized around norms of intimacy, so that what counts as private becomes a matter of worldmaking, not mere privacy (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Third, shame and secrecy: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tracks how epistemologies of the closet structure narration, audience, and risk (Sedgwick, 1990). Fourth, value hierarchies: Gayle Rubin charts a cultural “charmed circle” that privileges some sexualities and stigmatizes others, supplying a grammar of sanction that narrative can adopt, subvert, or recompose (Rubin, 1984).

This article consolidates scattered treatments of “sex in the Arabic novel” — which often tilt toward moral judgment or loose sociology — into an operational framework capable of measurement. We compound the paratextual thresholds of Gérard Genette (Genette, 1997), the legibility projects of the state (Scott, 1998), and the politics of boundary-making (Douglas, 1966) with a formalist attention to pacing and duration (Genette, 1980). In doing so, we treat the sexual scene not as a pre-theoretical content but as a choice among forms — ellipsis, avowal, or *mise en scène* — taken under specific eyes and in specific spaces.

### Why the Arabic novel?

From the late twentieth century onward, Arabic fiction has explored bodies and desire under dense regimes of honor, law, and market mediation. Scholarship has often mapped this exploration historically or thematically — e.g., nation and gender (El Sadda, 2012), translation and propriety (Booth, 2001), canon formation and form (Hafez, 1993; Allen, 1995) — with less attention to how sexual discourse is technically staged under constraint. Important sociological and anthropological interlocutors — such as Lila Abu-Lughod on honor and sentiment (Abu-Lughod, 1986), Joseph Massad on the politics of sexuality and discourse (Massad, 2007), and Saba Mahmood on normativity and agency (Mahmood, 2005) — underscore that “agency” under piety or shame is not simply the inverse of constraint. Yet we still lack a scene-level instrument that specifies when, why, and with what costs a text migrates from indirection to disclosure, and how spatial membranes and institutional eyes precipitate that migration.

### From description to measurement

What is missing is not more description but measurement: a tool that translates theoretical distinctions into codable variables. We address this gap by operationalizing two intersecting frames. The first is an *E–A–M axis* (Ellipsis/Allusion → Avowal/Confession → *Mise en scène*), capturing the mode of mediation actually chosen on the page. “Ellipsis/Allusion” marks figurative displacement, pronoun vagueness, or architectural proxies; “Avowal/Confession” names first-person or dialogic disclosure under an explicit gaze; “*Mise en scène*” denotes overt staging of bodies and acts. This axis is informed by Foucault’s analytics of confession (Foucault, 1978), Sedgwick’s account of audience and risk (Sedgwick, 1990), and Berlant & Warner’s mapping of publics (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

The second is a *G–S–V–T vector* (Gaze, Space, Voice, Tempo), registering the conditions under which mediation occurs. Gaze asks which eye governs the scene — intimate, communal, clerical, market, or legal (Foucault, 1978; Scott, 1998). Space asks where speech occurs — sealed room, threshold, semi-public venue, procedural forum (Douglas, 1966). Voice asks who speaks and in what key — free indirect discourse, diary, dialogic confession, public address (Genette, 1980). Tempo asks how time is handled — scene, summary, pause, ellipsis — since temporal expansion or contraction alters risk and visibility (Genette, 1980). Crossing these frames yields a coding matrix that captures how texts select

ellipsis, confession, or overt staging under different gazes and in different spaces. We then compute two composite, qualitative indices: MI (Mode of Confession Index) and MHM (Institutional Boundary Score).

## Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework of narrative representation, discourse, and social regulation, this study advances three exploratory hypotheses:

**H1:** Arabic novels examined in this study are expected to represent naming and visibility as mechanisms through which social and institutional power regulates identity formation.

**H2:** The selected narratives are expected to reveal an interaction between customary norms and institutional structures in shaping characters' experiences of surveillance and constraint.

**H3:** Acts of disclosure, resistance, and self-expression are expected to function as narrative strategies through which characters negotiate power relations and personal agency.

## Contribution

The contribution of this study is threefold. Conceptually, it reconceptualizes sexual taboo as a formal ecology governed by procedures, boundaries, and lack. Methodologically, it introduces a structured interpretive framework that combines the E–A–M axis with the G–S–V–T dimensions, using the MI and MHM indices as heuristic tools to support systematic comparison across narrative scenes rather than as instruments of statistical measurement (Moretti, 2013; Ramsay, 2011). Empirically, the study demonstrates how Arabic novels distribute speech about bodies under different forms of surveillance and across distinct spatial configurations, while showing how paratextual and institutional mechanisms shape these patterns of disclosure. The result is an analytical vocabulary that enables more explicit and consistent interpretations of how, where, and under whose gaze the unsayable becomes narratively sayable.

## 2. Methods

This study treats “saying the unsayable” not as a measurable textual variable but as a formal and relational process through which literary discourse negotiates the conditions of visibility, legitimacy, and disclosure. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s conception of confession as a technology of truth production (Foucault, 1978), Gérard Genette’s theory of paratextual mediation (Genette, 1997), Mary Douglas’s understanding of purity and impurity as systems of symbolic boundary-making (Douglas, 1966), and James C. Scott’s analysis of institutional legibility (Scott, 1998), the study develops a structured interpretive framework for scene-based close reading. Rather than reducing literary complexity to quantitative variables, the framework organizes interpretation around four interrelated dimensions: the mode of mediation through which disclosure occurs, the implied or explicit addressee, the spatial conditions that enable or constrain confession, and the institutional gaze under which the act of speaking acquires meaning. The Manifestness Index (MI) and the Monitoring and Harm Mechanisms (MHM) are therefore employed not as statistical measures but as heuristic constructs that synthesize these interpretive observations into transparent comparative profiles.

## 2.1 Analytic stance and unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is the scene — a contiguous stretch of discourse unified by time, place, and speaking voice, that yields one coherent “act of saying.” Transitions in space/time, shifts of focalization, or the insertion of documentary materials trigger a new scene (Genette, 1997; Ramsay, 2011). Each scene is also labeled, qualitatively, as dominated by Ellipsis/Allusion (E), Avowal/Confession (A), or Mise en scène (overt staging). The analytical coding was conducted primarily on the original Arabic editions of the seven novels; published English translations were used exclusively for the benefit of the international reader when presenting illustrative quotations. Whenever coding depended on linguistically sensitive phenomena — such as pronominal ambiguity, ellipsis, figurative displacement, lexical indirection, or implicit reference — the original Arabic wording served as the authoritative source.

## 2.2 Dimensions and anchors (ordinal, 0–3)

We code eight variables with explicit anchors. Table 1 defines each variable and its four ordered levels.

**Table 1. Coding dimensions and ordinal anchors (0–3)**

| Code | Variable              | 0                   | 1                       | 2                         | 3                           |
|------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| AG   | Agentivity of avowal  | coerced / extracted | under visible pressure  | dual / ambivalent         | voluntary, explicit         |
| AD   | Addressee             | inner monologue     | intimate dyad           | small circle              | public / procedural         |
| MM   | Mediation mode        | hint / ellipsis     | dense allusion          | constrained confession    | overt, staged scene         |
| SES  | Spatial exposure      | private, sealed     | private, porous         | semi-public               | public / procedural         |
| IC   | Institutional capture | none                | custom / religion       | intermediaries            | law / state coercion        |
| SO   | Sanction outcome      | none                | stigma                  | civil harm / loss         | legal punishment / violence |
| PG   | Paratext gatekeeping  | none                | soft warning            | age rating / label        | ban / seizure               |
| TT   | Taboo type            | minor / transient   | adultery / prostitution | identity / queer / incest | composite / stacked         |

*Rationale. AG tracks the passage from truths produced under authority toward truths produced by a speaking subject (Foucault, 1978). AD and SES capture the movement of speech from private chambers to procedural fora (Scott, 1998). PG records gatekeeping at the thresholds (Genette, 1997). TT registers the “load” of boundary-crossing (Douglas, 1966).*

## 2.3 Composite indices

To facilitate systematic comparison, the study employs two composite qualitative indices, each expressed on a standardized 0–100 scale and intended as heuristic summaries rather than statistical measures. The **Manifestness Index (MI)** estimates the degree to which an act of disclosure is explicit, intentional, and publicly articulated, integrating Agentivity (AG), Addressee (AD), Mediation Mode (MM), and Spatial Exposure (SES), with AG given the greatest weight because it distinguishes coerced truth-production from voluntary confession — a distinction central to Foucault’s conception of confession (Foucault, 1978). The **Monitoring and Harm Mechanisms (MHM)** index summarizes

the extent to which institutional structures regulate, constrain, or sanction disclosure, combining Institutional Capture (IC), Sanction Outcome (SO), and Paratextual Gatekeeping (PG). Alternative weighting schemes were examined through sensitivity analysis (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

## 2.4 Procedure and limitations

The procedure moves through corpus design (fixing titles, editions, and paratext variants for transparency), segmentation into scenes, codebook calibration, primary coding with 30% reserved for double coding, sensitivity analysis with alternative weights, a close-reading bridge for extreme or contradictory scenes, and transparent reporting of the coding file and codebook (Genette, 1997; Neuendorf, 2017; Ramsay, 2011). Fair-use limits on quotation are respected throughout. Ordinal coding compresses nuance between adjacent levels, which we mitigate by pairing indices with close readings; weights are argued rather than absolute, hence the sensitivity analysis.

## 3. Applied Analyses: Seven Novels

### 3.1 Raja Alem, *The Dove's Necklace* (2010/2016): Threshold Poetics in a Sacred City

Alem relocates confession from speaker to space. The narrator is the lane itself — “the Lane itself speaking, me and my many heads” (Alem, 2016, para. 9) — thereby installing a symbolic eye anchored in Mecca’s sacred geography rather than in any administrative apparatus. Doors, windows, and alley-bends operate as membranes in the Douglasian sense (Douglas, 1966, p. 44): semi-permeable thresholds that regulate rumor, shame, and desire. When a woman’s body is discovered “between two walls,” and “for the first time, the woman lay unveiled... ‘Unknown’” (Alem, 2016, paras. 45–47), the gaze shifts from symbolic to procedural (police, ambulance, registry). That pivot tracks our E–A–M axis: from organized ellipsis under a sacred, communal optic to constrained confession once the state’s dispositif of cataloguing is activated (Foucault, 1978, pp. 17–35, 58–61).

**Table 2. Scene coding — Alem**

| Scene            | Eye                | Space               | Strategy               | Function                         |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Lane-as-narrator | sacred / symbolic  | thresholds / alleys | elliptical, spatial    | enable speech via place          |
| Discovery        | state / procedural | alley → record      | constrained confession | convert shame to file            |
| Whispers         | place-as-eye       | doors / windows     | organized ellipsis     | sustain taboo under sacred limit |

The sacred urban fabric does not simply inhibit disclosure; rather, it reshapes the ways in which knowledge, confession, and visibility are produced by relocating acts of revelation onto spaces, thresholds, and objects. Through the procedural gaze of the state, forms of symbolic knowledge are gradually transformed into administrative categories of truth (Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1978).

### 3.2 Haydar Haydar, *A Banquet for Seaweed* (1983/2000): Public Intimacy and Statement-by-Act

Haydar pushes disclosure toward the upper bound of Arabic prose without reducing erotic representation to explicit or purely pornographic description. Two micro-regimes of the gaze organize scenes: customary-familial oversight and public urban visibility. “Let’s sit down in a café” relocates

dialogue into a quasi-public arena that amplifies avowal through exposure (Haidar, 1983/2000, “Winter,” para. 87). Elsewhere a landlord rebukes the protagonist — “You are teachers, sheikh... not to chase women” (Haidar, 1983/2000, lines 149–150) — condensing communal surveillance into a single admonition. The novel culminates in statement-by-act (the sea leap), converting language into body and protest — what Foucault calls the suturing of truth to procedures and flesh (1978, pp. 58–61).

**Table 3. Scene coding — Haydar**

| Scene         | Eye             | Space       | Strategy         | Function                  |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Lesson room   | customary / kin | closed room | explicit avowal  | negotiate honor code      |
| Corniche café | public / gaze   | open, urban | scene + speech   | test legitimacy of saying |
| The leap      | collective gaze | edge / sea  | statement-by-act | close protest arc         |

MI is high ( $\approx 70$ –75) due to volitional, publicly mediated avowals. MHM peaks extra-textually with the 2000 Egyptian controversy (bans/seizures), exemplifying the Foucauldian paradox that censorship proliferates discourse by rerouting it into courts and streets (Foucault, 1978; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001).

### 3.3 Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (1998/2006): Distributed Avowal as Memory Surgery

Khoury relocates confession to a collective clinic of memory. “Umm Hassan is dead” opens in a makeshift hospital, aligning voice with triage and testimony (Khoury, 2006, para. 1). Later: “You know Arabic... You’re an Arab, Sister — aren’t you?” frames avowal as a negotiation of language and home (Khoury, 2006, para. 42). The water jar becomes a proxy witness; its passing/withholding scripts who may speak. Avowal is thus distributed across bodies, objects, and rooms, resisting the single cathartic purge. Genette’s paratextuality helps here: the novel’s embedded documents, tapes, and bedside vignettes function as micro-thresholds channeling — and limiting — what can be said (Genette, 1997).

**Table 4. Scene coding — Khoury**

| Scene          | Eye                  | Space         | Strategy           | Function            |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Triage opening | history / collective | clinic / camp | distributed avowal | suture memory       |
| House return   | society / state      | seized home   | dialogic avowal    | negotiate home      |
| The jar        | place / other        | home / field  | object-scene       | transfer sayability |

MI is mid-range ( $\approx 60$ –65); MHM is moderate, with communal/historical rather than judicial capture predominating (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

### 3.4 Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh* (1993/2000): Scar-Language and the Politics of Lack

Mosteghanemi translates desire into loss: “they amputated my arm, and others amputated your childhood” (Mosteghanemi, 2000, para. 1). The painter’s studio and exhibition hall are porous interiors where avowal occurs through canvases, dates, and signatures. The confession is metalinguistic — “we write in the language in which we feel things” — placing Arabic/French under a single ethical optic (Mosteghanemi, 2000). Lacan’s objet petit a clarifies how the scar (and the gaze) concentrate desire without consummation (Lacan, 1977, pp. 96, 181).

**Table 5. Scene coding — Mosteghanemi**

| Scene           | Eye                 | Space          | Strategy            | Function          |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| The scar        | history / self      | body / studio  | metaphoric avowal   | politicize desire |
| The canvas      | public / audience   | gallery / city | public avowal (art) | authorize self    |
| Language choice | reader / linguistic | dialogic space | linguistic avowal   | ethics of tongue  |

MI is mid-high ( $\approx 65\text{--}70$ ) by volitional avowal and semi-public exhibition; MHM modest, absent formal bans. The aesthetic substitutes naming with figuration, confirming that taboo is a design choice rather than a censor's remainder (Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1990).

### 3.5 Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Sacred Night* (1987): Naming the Body under Ritual Eyes

This sequel to *Child of Sand* pivots on the sovereign act of renaming a gendered body. The deathbed disclosure initiates a ritualized pedagogy of confession; scenes in hammam, street, and cell bind identity to purification and punishment. The institutional eye is plural (family, community, state); the channel is structured yet morally ambivalent. The bath operates as boundary-workshop (Douglas, 1966), the prison as coercive script. Avowal oscillates between instruction and sanction.

**Table 6. Scene coding — Ben Jelloun**

| Scene           | Eye                | Space            | Strategy           | Function         |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Deathbed naming | family / custom    | home / ritual    | constrained avowal | rename the body  |
| Hammam          | community / female | bath / threshold | object-scene       | train boundaries |
| Prison          | state              | cell             | coerced avowal     | inscribe norm    |

The novel reveals two interconnected modes of control: the first emerges from customs and traditions imposed by the community, while the second is associated with the regulatory and institutional mechanisms of the state. At its center lies the idea that naming is not merely a linguistic act of identification but a practice that produces meaning, shapes identity, and positions individuals within a particular social and epistemic order — reflecting Foucault's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and authority.

### 3.6 Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (2002): Surveillance City and Mediated Disclosure

Here the apartment block miniaturizes urban surveillance: dossiers, sermons, tabloids, and market spectacle. Avowal is rarely a protected monologue; it is mediated (blackmail, investigative journalism) or coerced (police). Rooftops, stairwells, and streets stage public intimacy (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Ethically, the novel tests focalization justice: how to see bodies without reducing them to spectacle.

**Table 7. Scene coding — Al Aswany**

| Scene            | Eye              | Space            | Strategy            | Function              |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Tabloid exposure | press / market   | street / tabloid | mediated confession | commodify avowal      |
| Police file      | state / security | office / cell    | coerced avowal      | produce dossier-truth |
| Rooftop romance  | communal gaze    | semi-public roof | scene with ellipsis | test spectacle        |

MI  $\approx 60$ ; MHM  $\approx 60\text{--}70$ . The text anatomizes how institutions bend confession into marketable narratives and procedural truths (Foucault, 1978; Genette, 1997).

### 3.7 Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005): Platformed Avowal and the Economy of Reputation

Alsanea's epistolary-digital form migrates confession into platform infrastructures. The watching eye is the networked — friends, lurkers, censors, suitors. Avowal is serial, partial, reputational; sanctions are stigmatic and matrimonial more than legal. Private rooms are remapped into porous chatrooms; the message becomes the scene.

**Table 8. Scene coding — Alsanea**

| Scene               | Eye              | Space         | Strategy           | Function                    |
|---------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Weekly email        | crowd / platform | inbox / forum | serial confession  | authorize voice by audience |
| Family intervention | kin / custom     | home          | constrained avowal | discipline reputation       |
| Breakup thread      | public gossip    | timeline      | scene via messages | convert privacy to plot     |

MI mid-high ( $\approx 65$ – $70$ ); MHM low-mid ( $\approx 45$ – $55$ ): stigma > law. The novel anticipates platform literatures where paratext is not a margin but a delivery system (Genette, 1997).

## 4. Calibrated Comparison: *Beloved* (1987) and Portnoy's Complaint (1969)

The American pairing supplies two distinct technologies of avowal that permit a controlled test of our eye–boundary–strategy model. In *Beloved*, avowal is distributed across a haunted domestic space and a choir of voices. The novel's inaugural sentence — “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom” — installs the house itself as a boundary-device that privatizes and politicizes confession by folding personal memory into racial time (Morrison, 1987, ch. 1). What follows is not a clinical purge but a communal, recursive surfacing — Morrison's “rememory” — whose sanction is neither jail nor tabloids but the ethical labor of remembering within an intimate public (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Morrison, 1987, ch. 2).

By contrast, Portnoy's Complaint is a monologic clinical confession addressed to Dr. Spielvogel: the procedural eye is explicit, the room sealed, the addressee singular (Roth, 1969, pp. 1–3). This setting maximizes MI ( $\approx 95$ – $100$ ) through voluntary, explicit avowal under institutional protection (therapeutic privilege) and lowers MHM inside the fiction (no bans are needed to compel speech), though extra-textual controversy registers market and communal sanctions rather than legal interdiction (cf. Sedgwick, 1990; Rubin, 1984).

The comparison is formal, not moral. It shows that eye-type and space configure disclosure irrespective of cultural hierarchy: a closed therapeutic room with a procedural eye encourages exhaustive naming (Roth, 1969), whereas a haunted house with a symbolic eye encourages distributed, metaphoric avowal (Morrison, 1987). These templates illuminate our Arabic corpus without collapsing historical singularities: Alem's sacred lane parallels *Beloved*'s symbolic house (symbolic eye → organized ellipsis); Haydar's café parallels Portnoy's staged address (public addressee) but lacks the protection of confidentiality, hence higher stigma capture (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1978).

## 5. Interpretive Findings

Three aggregate patterns emerge from the analysis. First, the **engineering of disclosure**: MI climbs as avowal becomes voluntary, publicly addressed, and scenically mediated; it falls where symbolic eyes (sacred geography, honor) demand organized ellipsis. Second, **non-legal capture matters**: MHM spikes not only with legal bans but with paratextual and reputational controls — press exposés, platform gossip, clerical invective — whose intermediary capture punches above legal weight (Genette, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 1998). Third, **oscillation is a design feature**: the same novel slides across the axis. The Dove's Necklace dips into whispering alley scenes and rises in procedural rooms; The Sacred Night moves from ritualized domestic naming to carceral coercion. These shifts are not noise; they are rhythms by which taboo is mobilized to meter disclosure.

Mapping MI against MHM produces four interpretive quadrants: Portnoy occupies the high-MI, low-to-mid-MHM zone (maximal confession in a protected room, coercion externalized to the market); A Banquet for Seaweed during the 2000 controversy occupies the high-MI, high-MHM zone (public avowal plus bans, the classic Foucauldian paradox); The Yacoubian Building and Gate of the Sun sit in the mid-MI, mid-MHM band (mediated or distributed avowal under communal eyes); and Memory in the Flesh occupies the mid-MI, low-MHM zone (volitional, metaphor-led confession in porous interiors).

## 6. Discussion: Testing the Hypotheses

**H1 — Taboo as design (supported).** Across cases, sexual representation functions as a choice among strategies (elliptic, avowed, scenic) conditioned by the watching eye and its spatial membrane. Increases in disclosure are engineered, not merely “courageous,” as shown when a text moves from threshold talk to file-making talk (Alem, 2016; Foucault, 1978, pp. 58–61).

**H2 — Institution generates form (supported).** The entry of a procedural eye — police file, courtroom, clinical room — predictably raises MI by converting private trouble into publicly addressable truth (Haidar, 1983/2000; Roth, 1969). Conversely, symbolic eyes (sacred cities, communal honor) shift speech to thresholds and objects, distributing confession onto doors, windows, jars, scars (Douglas, 1966, p. 44; Morrison, 1987).

**H3 — Calibrated comparison (supported).** Portnoy approximates the high-MI endpoint of a protected, singular addressee; Beloved approximates a mid-MI form of distributed avowal under a symbolic eye. The Arabic cases align with these templates without being subsumed by them: Haydar's café stages a public addressee but lacks therapeutic protection, raising stigma capture; Alem's lane emplaces the eye in sacred space, depressing MI unless the state enters (Alem, 2016; Haidar, 1983/2000; Morrison, 1987; Roth, 1969).

Two theoretical clarifications follow. First, following Foucault, confession is productive: truth is authored by procedures, papers, and rooms, not extracted from a natural interior; the “truth” of the same act differs when produced by a tabloid, a police dossier, a sermon, or a painter's catalogue (Foucault, 1978, pp. 17–35, 58–61). Second, Douglasian boundary-work explains why bathrooms, doors, windows, and jars read as confessional devices: they reallocate matter (and meaning) to proper places (Douglas, 1966, p. 44). A Lacanian rider clarifies why scars, gazes, and windows exert such pull: they are small objects that cause desire while refusing full nomination — the objet petit a as the motor of indirection (Lacan, 1977, pp. 96, 181).

## 7. Conclusion

Sexual taboo in the modern Arabic novel is less a thematic dare than a workshop of forms. When we follow the eye that watches and the boundary that holds, we see texts choosing among three economies of saying — elliptical, avowed, scenic — to achieve aesthetic and political ends. The dispositif — eye → boundary → strategy → function — organizes the relation between institution and form (Foucault, 1978; Douglas, 1966). Our seven applied analyses show that disclosure is an engineered variable responsive to sacred sanctity, communal honor, procedural truth-seeking, and market/platform logics. The calibrated comparison with Morrison and Roth demonstrates that these parameters travel across cultures without erasing history: symbolic houses depress naming; sealed rooms intensify it.

The interpretive framework and conceptual model proposed in this study are designed to be analytically transferable rather than text-specific. They may be extended to other literary corpora and to platform-mediated narratives, where algorithmic visibility functions as a new institutional gaze and digital interfaces constitute evolving spatial boundaries (Genette, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 1998). Within this framework, the “unsayable” is not treated as a narrative residue but as a strategic resource through which literary texts organize confession, negotiate silence, and produce meaning across different regimes of gaze, space, strategy, and communicative function.

### Declarations

**Ethical Approval:** This study is a theoretical and comparative literary analysis based entirely on published literary and scholarly sources. No human participants were involved. All quotations observe fair-use limits and are appropriately cited.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Data Availability:** All primary literary works and secondary sources analysed in this study are publicly available and cited in the references.

**Author Contributions:** M. Al-deeky: conceptualization, analytical framework, and supervision. N. Qakhaoun: literature review, scene coding, and drafting. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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