

An urban bedouin
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Ahmad Faqih
GARDENS OF THE NIGHT A trilogy 48Spp. Quartet. £ 17. 07043 2779

It seems fair to assume that Ahmad Faqih's trilogy, *Gardens of the Night*, is to some extent autobiographical. The author, Dr Faqih (which means holy), and his creation, Dr Al-Iman (of faith), are both Libyans who gain doctorates at Edinburgh in Arabic literature during the 1970s. The first book of the trilogy, *I Shall Offer Another City*, is a portrait of Edinburgh as a bohemian and hedonistic place in which Dr Khalil Al-Iman explores his sexuality while completing his thesis on *The Thousand and One Nights*. On his return to Tripoli, as recounted in the third book, *A Tunnel Lit by One Woman*, he guards his thesis carefully and does not publish it because he fears the ridicule and, outrage of his peers: "I was aware of just how sensitive the subject of my thesis was."

Faqih attempts an exploration of the Libyan male psyche. Wishing to reclaim this mythic sensuality as part of a contemporary Arab identity, he has Khalil boast that "what you call sexual liberation, and think of as a Western discovery, was discovered by our Oriental societies at the beginning of the Middle Ages". Khalil is liberated enough to indulge in various affairs, fathering a child whom he abandons; but when he finally meets Sana, the woman of his dreams, he is tortured by the idea that she might have kissed someone else.

Khalil is not entirely unreflecting about his jealousy and rages, but he seems to see sadism as part of Arab masculinity, to "the Bedouin" in him. He is aware of his desire first to worship then to degrade women: "my hasty efforts to establish a relationship had caused me to plead and to debase myself, so that as soon as I found compliance in a woman, I sought vengeance for all my previous moments of weakness." Yet his view of women as "an amulet to dispel the diseases of loneliness and melancholy" is never questioned.

Faqih seems besotted by Khalil to the detriment of everything else. (He is so cavalier with his secondary characters that Linda, Khalil's lover and mother of his child, has hair which is blonde on page 8, but chestnut by page 40). there is no attempt to breathe life into any of the other characters or the settings they inhabit, whether it be Edinburgh, Tripoli or the mythical Coral City of the second book, *These are the Borders of My Kingdom*.

This is the least successful of the three books. On his return to Libya, Khalil suffers a nervous breakdown and is transported to a mythical medieval Sufi utopia. This is a bland and vulgar oriental pastoral idyll, laden with exhortations to free love and vaguely socialist, vaguely Muslim, communitarianism, which grafts hippie culture on to a dilute form of Islamic government.

Faqih does not satisfy the Western reader's. perhaps voyeuristic, desire to catch a glimpse of "authentic" Arab culture. Instead, he wanders the far reaches of his hero's vanity: "the Bedouin who had been sleeping tamed in my breast was now saddling his horse which neighed and galloped off towards the city of domes and musk and saffron."

The hero' s callow introspection is made less palatable by the faulty and ugly English of this translation . The novels are full of awkward sentences like: "For the first time in my life I felt the fresh. stimulating passion". and "that night. many of my colleagues came over with Adnan to condole with me." This is surprising since the principal translator. Russell Harris. was the successful translator of Amin Maloul's lyrical *Samarkand*.

