

# Transformation

SHIREEN HAMZA

*Northwestern University*

Narrating *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*—a novel about Islam and motherhood, crew and captain, sorcery and sea monsters—is a quiet scribe named Jamal. The novel’s titular character, Amina, towers over him. She is a reformed pirate captain whose height, strength, and behavior are praised and reviled by others throughout the novel. Reluctantly coming out of retirement, she undertakes a perilous journey and helps the teenage girl she was sent to rescue, Dunya, to save the world from an evil sorcerer. Alongside the fast-paced action of the novel’s plot, Dunya eventually transitions and becomes Jamal. But this is only revealed at the end of the novel, when we realize this personal journey was gently unfolding behind the narration. Amid perilous and magical exploits, Amina’s and Jamal’s nonconformity and personal transformations are the beating heart of the novel.

More than halfway through the book, Amina and her crew finally find Dunya, whom they have been attempting to rescue from Falco, an evil sorcerer. The next day, Amina visits Dunya in the captain’s quarters of her ship and notices her wearing a turban and men’s clothing. After asking Dunya about Falco, Amina says:

“Is this how you see yourself? How you wish to be addressed?”

Letting out a broken laugh that seemed like it belonged to someone far older, Dunya met my gaze. “I do not know, nakhuda. Nothing has ever felt quite right. I had hoped to find out, but for now I suppose I am still Dunya.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the kind of scene a historian rarely gets to uncover in the archive: a tender moment of witnessing, which unfolds beyond the purview of a public space or court.

Many lasting records of events, which we can read decades and centuries later, are created by institutions of power. A violent encounter with authorities is often what makes nonelite people in the past visible to historians, especially historians of sexuality. The dark nature of these archives limits the questions we can ask about sex, gender, and sexuality,

---

1. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 313.

especially the further back in history we go. The evidence at our disposal often fails to meet our desires for liberatory and usable pasts, both in their revelations of violence and their erasure of many voices most interesting to marginalized people today. Historians of sexuality have questioned whether such archives can live up to the desires queer and trans people bring to them.<sup>2</sup> The freedom of the fantasy novel illuminates the failures of the archive and fulfills some of the frustrated hopes contemporary people bring to it.

Reading transforms people, and this also happens to characters in the novel. In her family library, Dunya uncovers their history as sages protecting humanity from the unseen world, a role far beyond her grandmother's desire for social prominence in Aden. Dunya tries bringing texts mentioning gender non-conforming people to her grandmother and even to the sorcerer Falco to share her own feelings about gender, but they say these were "misguided souls."<sup>3</sup> Many people turn to historical books and documents to find affirmation and inspiration, especially when denied community in the present, but the past does not answer us easily.

Though trans identity is a modern phenomenon, there were people who moved from one sex to another in the medieval Islamic world. Officially, this was done through the category of *khunthā*, which some modern scholars translate as intersex or the medial sex.<sup>4</sup> As a terminology of Islamic law with many implications, the category *khunthā* was unlikely to have been embraced by individuals, except under the direst of circumstances. Though there are extensive rules in Islamic law for how *khunthās* should navigate gendered activities like bathing, prayer, and inheritance, to be declared a *khunthā mushkil*, a person considered neither man nor woman, would have created a difficult life for people.<sup>5</sup> Courts seem to have avoided this.<sup>6</sup>

Narrators of most surviving stories of someone being declared a *khunthā*, and authorized to transition to a new gender role, remark on these events as a wondrous (*ʿajīb*) aspect of God's creation. For example, al-Muḥibbī (d. 1545) narrates how a man in sixteenth-century Damascus fell in love with a younger man named ʿAlī. For reasons not made explicit in al-Muḥibbī's chronicle, this young man was brought to the court to be examined. There, experts discovered he had a vulva covered by a thin layer of skin. This skin was removed, and ʿAlī was declared to be a woman, ʿAliyyā. She was then married to her lover, and later gave birth to children, an event of great renown and wonder among the people of

---

2. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

3. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 313.

4. Indira Falk Gesink, "Intersex Bodies in Premodern Islamic Discourse: Complicating the Binary," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 152–73.

5. Saqer A. Almarri, "Non-binary Sexual and Gender Identities in the Community: The *Khunthā* as an Isolated Being in the Mosque," *Body and Religion* 3, no. 2 (2019): 167–88.

6. Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 161. In the Ottoman-era rulings and historical chronicles that Scalenghe studied, she did not find a single judge who actually designated someone as having a truly medial sex, a *khunthā mushkil*.

Damascus.<sup>7</sup> We—and the people of this city—find out about ‘Aliyyā because the authorities exposed her body and made her visible to us. And yet so much remains unknown in this story, and questions about the desires of ‘Aliyyā herself remain unanswerable.

After learning about this story in the work of historian Sara Scalenghe, I wrote about it in a blogpost in 2020.<sup>8</sup> The author of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, Shannon Chakraborty, read this blogpost, which was part of her inspiration for the character of Jamal. While I am honored to be part of this creative process, there are many crucial differences between the character Jamal and the person ‘Aliyyā. Jamal can remain Jamal as long as he does not return to Aden (where people know him as Dunya). As the novel implies, a mobile life at sea may have afforded some people more space to maneuver on the margins. The only human legal authority to appear in *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* is the portside judge who allows Amina to drunkenly marry the “demon” Raksh. The peri court of the unseen realm tries to do away with Amina and ultimately ends up hiring her to hunt down magical objects. The pirate court of Soqotra refuses to help her at all. Neither Jamal nor any of the novel’s characters find themselves in *sharī‘a* courts (of Islamic law) or brought before the political authorities, the *siyāsa* courts. However, the only reason we know about named individuals designated as *khunthā* is because they appeared in these courts.

Though we cannot know how ‘Aliyyā felt about the end of her story, others end rather differently, with political authorities meting out corporal punishment. Two different historical chronicles, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, offer us conflicting narratives of the same violent event: the murder of a couple by the state. The first story is narrated in a historical chronicle by Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 1546). He has a negative opinion of one of the victims, Muḥammad b. Sallāma, because of his involvement with the Sufi practice of associating with beardless youths. Despite this negative opinion, the word *‘ajīb*, or wondrous, introduces the narration:

On Tuesday, the first of Ramadan, which was Eid, a strange (*‘ajīb*) tale reached the people of Damascus about Egypt. A young Sufi Muslim man named Muḥammad b. Sallāma... became well-known in Damascus and then traveled to Egypt. ...He kept the company of beardless youths, as was his habit in Damascus. When last Ramadan approached, Muḥammad b. Sallāma brought him to a court of witnesses in Egypt, dressed in the clothes of a girl—a *niqāb* and *jilbāb*, scrubbed and tailored. Muḥammad asked to be married to her and received a positive response. After some days passed, his neighbors reported him. The witnesses grew fearful and brought his case to the attention of the political authority, Amīr Ṭarābāy. The court called him and investigated the matter. They found [his wife] to be a boy in the clothes of a girl. Then the boy claimed that he is a *khunthā*. Women examined him and found him to be a male; they did not recognize

---

7. Muḥammad Amīn al-Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fi a‘yān al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2014), 3:316.

8. Shireen Hamza, “[Annulling the Marriage of Two Men: A Marginal Note in a Yemeni Manuscript](#),” *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, June 10, 2020.

his claim. He then wounded himself in the area beneath his genitals to make it seem like he was menstruating, but... they revealed this to be a lie. The aforementioned Amīr ordered the two of them to be beaten with batons and paraded on oxen in Egypt, before being beaten again and imprisoned until death.”<sup>9</sup>

Another account of this sad story appears in a biographical dictionary by the scholar Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), who was more sympathetic than Ibn Ṭūlūn to Muḥammad:

Muḥammad b. Sallāma was a wise shaykh, an ascetic on the Hamadānī Sufi and Shāfi‘ī path. Al-Ḥumṣī reported that he was killed by being beaten with batons, and the reason for this was that he married an obviously *khunthā* woman. He had sex with her and removed her virginity. She had a cousin from Morocco who wanted to marry her, but she did not accept. Her cousin went to the head of the political authority, Amīr Ṭarābāy, complaining of the two of them. He had them brought before him, beaten with batons, disgracefully seated on two oxen and taken around Cairo. He died before he reached the door of the prison; no one asked after him. “There is no capacity or strength but in Allah.” The people were greatly saddened. His death was on the 11th of Ramadan year 911 [AH], may Allah have mercy on him.<sup>10</sup>

Exposure, punishment, and death are the only part of the story shared by both accounts—in addition to an absence of any name for Muḥammad b. Sallāma’s wife. It seems that this person tried unsuccessfully to use the provisions of Islamic law for *khunthās* to survive exposure by authorities. I want to take consolation in the sadness and regret of the people of Cairo over the murders, which bring to mind modern violence against gay and trans people. However, by reading these two reports together, I am left only with questions. Did tattling neighbors find there was something unusual about this couple, and if so, how? Or did a spurned cousin of Muḥammad b. Sallāma’s wife claim she was a boy in order to have his revenge on her? Did she agree to the marriage? Was she a boy?

The category of *khunthā* allows us to reckon with how differently sex and gender categories functioned in the medieval Islamic world. Gender was understood to change with age, for example; children were in their own category, and a beardless youth was different from a man. There was also a lack of fixity around sex, which could change within a person’s lifetime. Al-Qazwīnī, in his compendium of the wonders of creation, lists five possible sexes, on a scale from masculine men to feminine women.<sup>11</sup> And yet, there were many prohibitions in the gendered societies of the premodern Islamic world, and dire consequences for those who broke them publicly.

---

9. Shams al-Dīn Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Kitāb Mufākahat al-khullān fi ḥawādith al-zamān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998), 240. The pronouns are translated exactly as found in original texts in this article.

10. Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira bi-a‘yān al-mi‘at al-‘āshira* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 1:51.

11. Zakariyā b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī, *‘Ajā‘ib al-makhlūqāt* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Alamī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 2000), 260. See also Ahmed Ragab, “One, Two, or Many Sexes: Sex Differentiation in Medieval Islamic Medical Thought,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (2015): 428–54.

Being trans today subverts a system of binary sex enforced by the modern state.<sup>12</sup> One's sex is declared in the hospital at birth and printed on one's birth certificate and all subsequent ID cards. Sex is enforced by power. As historian Afsaneh Najmabadi puts it in the case of Iran, "one cannot simply pronounce oneself trans; the truth of that designation depends on documented affirmation by some other-than-self authority."<sup>13</sup> But before the spread of colonial paradigms of gender and sexuality, as well as the biopolitical control of the modern state, bodies were not exposed and categorized as ubiquitously as they are now. Some social events could lead to bodies to be examined, usually related to marriage, pregnancy, illness, or death. Though stories about *khunthās* and transitions are few and far between, there were likely many more people who negotiated ambiguities of sex and gender without consulting a court or leaving an archival trace.

Chakraborty uses Jamal's narration to point out the gap between writing by men about women and the vibrancy of those women's lives. When introducing the story, Jamal places himself in the tradition of "traveled men of our ummah" sharing "the wonders of the world by creating accounts of their voyages." He also critiques these men for their portrayal of women as "forgotten spouses and unnamed daughters; wet nurses and handmaidens; thieves and harlots. Witches."<sup>14</sup> But Chakraborty also opens up the category of male author, showing us that it could include people we don't expect. Still, in dreaming and writing what we cannot see in the archive into a fictional narrative, Chakraborty fixes the unresolvable uncertainties created by the fragments of the archive. Scholars have also reminded us that, beyond documents and normative texts, medieval Arabic literature offers us a fertile ground for theorizing more just futures.<sup>15</sup> In stories of cross-dressing and gender transition, people are often astonished, for example, by a king who reveals he is a woman. But they accept the possibility of a single person embodying multiple genders over the course of their life.

Many readers have celebrated the novel's overall approach to gender and sexuality. Amina's gender as a tall, broad-shouldered warrior who towers over men, and her sexuality as an older woman, is perhaps just as unconventional as Jamal's transition. But the latter has drawn far more objections, as some Muslims in North America have increasingly aligned themselves with the conservative moral panic of transphobia.<sup>16</sup> Some such readers have characterized "being trans" as a sin and have taken issue with practicing Muslims like

---

12. Susan Stryker, "Biopolitics," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 38-42.

13. Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 167.

14. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 1-2.

15. Samantha Pellegrino, "The Gender of Magic: Constructions of Nonbinary Gender Categories in *Sirat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*," *postmedieval* 13, no. 3 (2022): 351-70; Zayde Antrim, "Qamarayn: The Erotics of Sameness in the 1001 Nights," *Al-Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 28 (2020): 1-44. The same could be said of other languages of the Indian Ocean world, like Urdu; see Pasha Khan, "Fixed Possibilities: The Threat of Transmasculinity in the Urdu Tale of Agar," in *Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere*, ed. Omar Kasmani, 49-64 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

16. Kristopher Wells and Junaid Jahangir, "Opinion: How Parental Rights Has Co-opted Some Muslim Communities," *Edmonton Journal*, October 24 2023.

Amina and her navigator Majid embracing Jamal's transition.<sup>17</sup> There's a lot of talk of sin in this novel. Amina wrestles with and turns away from the theft, drinking, and violence of her years of piracy and turns towards the righteous path. She struggles with her guilt in bringing Raksh on board her ship, where he endangers the lives of her crew. None of this is associated with Jamal. This novel offers a salve to those whose hearts have ached at the swell in anti-trans sentiment among Muslim scholars and institutions. As my friend recently said, "the alignment of Islamophobia and queer- and transphobia has caused the most acute suffering in my life."

Trans people make us all more free, as do other gender expansive people with identities predating the modern period. Gender expansive people also face immense danger, especially trans women. Not everyone who wants to is able to transition "permanently," to gain state recognition, to move from A to B. The violent imposition of hetero-patriarchy and binary gender onto a more complex world has been unbearably accelerated by colonialism and the violence of modern states. Centuries into this process, gender expansive people continue resisting.

This novel starts and ends with wonder, or with Amina trying to return to that feeling. Jamal, the young trans scribe, is wondrous for many reasons. He is the scion of a line of magical savants and protectors of humanity. Jamal at first leaves home with, and then ultimately defeats, a villainous Frankish sorcerer. He stands up to his own captain and, even more terrifying, his grandmother!

When the people of Damascus celebrated and marveled at 'Aliyyā having children, it was because she challenged their notion of the possible. I love that feeling, though it can be destabilizing too. Wonder disrupts the order we think we know and need. Among creatures like peris and marids, and phases of the moon ensnared in wash basins, Amina witnessing and welcoming Jamal into being is one of the wonders this fantasy novel offers us. It is both a reminder of, and a peek beyond, the limits of historical texts, a hand outreached towards ancestors whose moments of joy can only be sensed and never proven.

---

17. Ayah Miraj, "The Limits of Sin in Fantasy: A Book Review of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*," *Traversing Tradition*, July 26, 2023.