

# The Quest for Lesbian Ethics in Contemporary Middle-Eastern Cultures

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I want to show how the lesbian is denied any ethical framework for self-assertion within the morality of the closet. Drawing on Foucault's, Butler's, and Wittig's theories of bodies, power and sexuality, I examine the perplexing position of the lesbian within the moral codes of hegemonic Arab cultures that play a major role in making an arbitrary connection between morality and institutionalized heterosexuality in a manner that legitimizes homophobia, either openly or in a subtle manner. In this context, I expose various types of discourses that are used as a means of controlling both the private and public spheres and of maintaining control over both worlds. "If power is everywhere", as Foucault argued, so too is resistance possible from multiple sources. Hence, in my paper, I confront several forces that forbid the emergence of lesbian ethics in most Middle-Eastern societies

What does it mean to be inherently lesbian in cultures that define the female in accordance with the biology of the body and with the essentialized heterosexual expectations that revolve around it? In fact, defining the self as essentially and inherently lesbian is a difficult and complicated process, because it entails confronting not only the dominant heterosexual discourse, or the bisexual ones, but also the traditional feminist discourse that associates between the female body and the woman, leaving not enough room for an individualized lesbian specificity to exist apart from the limiting definitions of sexual differences and gender expectations. The real lesbian; the one who is not made by social expectations is persistently neglected, suppressed or misrepresented under many inherited and recycled moral views that stem from the ideology of the closet that uses heterosexual essentialism as a means of grouping all females in one category that supposedly shares similar ethics and desires.

In this paper, I want to show how the lesbian is denied any ethical framework for self-assertion within the morality of the closet. Drawing on Foucault's, Butler's, and Wittig's theories of bodies, power and sexuality, I examine the perplexing position of the lesbian within the moral codes of hegemonic Arab cultures that play a major role in making an arbitrary connection between morality and institutionalized heterosexuality in a manner that legitimizes homophobia, either openly or in a subtle manner. In this context, I expose various types of discourses that are used as a means of controlling both the private and public spheres and of maintaining control over both worlds. "If power is everywhere, as Foucault argued, so too is resistance possible from multiple sources" (cited in Chanter 2006: 17). Hence, in my paper, I

confront several forces that forbid the emergence of lesbian ethics in most Middle-Eastern societies.

## The Lesbian Body and the Power of the Gaze

According to Foucault, the body is produced through power. The body is a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves. In *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, the body is seen as a site of culturally contested meanings, and 'sex' is itself an 'imaginary point', the consequence of a materiality fully 'invested' with ideas (Foucault 1980: 153). Foucault's analysis assumes that bodies get signified and regulated under certain conditions of power and discourse (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975 and *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I., 1980). Foucault is particularly concerned with the relations between political power and the body. The main issue in my quest for lesbian ethics is theorizing both invisibility and silence on the one hand, and showing that the lesbian body is a body that resists various types of power and that refuses to be regulated or produced by any heteronormalizing gaze. In *Discipline and Punish*, "the soul is [seen as] the prison of the body" (1975: 30). In my analysis, I attempt to show how the lesbian soul is imprisoned by the historically inherited gaze of the female body. It is the dominant perception of the female body that imprisons any possibility of creating socio-political ethics that assert both the lesbian soul and body.

Since the discourse of sexuality emanates from certain culturally specific and historically prescriptive conceptions of the female body, the 'lesbian' as a category remains a vague and obscure concept. Seen in a heterosexual biological light, the lesbian identity is never perceived as a fixed entity with an authentic core, essence, ethics, and politics. Using Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), it becomes clear that the homophobic regime of knowing is the epistemology of the closet. The bond of knowledge and ignorance is there in the relationship between invisible lesbians themselves and between non-lesbians. The Contemporary Middle-Eastern cultures convey a type of knowledge that maintains the invisibility of any discourse on lesbian subjectivity. Denial of differences and unwillingness to understand them are intertwined with hostility towards differences. This type of hostility is closeted and this makes it more difficult to confront it and to give voice to silence. The Arab-Islamic closet is a metaphorical place where abuse, lies and manipulations can take place discretely, depriving anyone of the ability to confront them. In cultures of surveillance, people tend to modify their behavior under the belief that they are constantly being watched even if they cannot directly see who is watching them. This possible surveillance, 'whether real or unreal', can have 'self-regulating effects' (see Sturken & Cartwright 2009: 106–108).

In this paper, I try to liberate the lesbian ethics from the authority of the gaze and the limiting discourses of sexualities. Hence, I reflect upon the limitations of the medical gaze, the historical gaze, the literary gaze, and even the feminist gaze. I also expose the regulating effects of the gaze under systems of surveillance in the closet. By analyzing some selected texts, I examine the gap between the lesbian as a speak-

ing self and a female body on the one hand and the hetero-patriarchal ideologies and the domineering power of the medical, social, Islamic, sexual and the hetero-centric feminist gaze on the other hand. Meanwhile, I show the need for lesbian ethics that emerge out personal experiences and narratives, rather than from the approval/disapproval of policy-makers and men of religion.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault uses the term gaze to show the distribution of power in various institutions of society. The gaze is not something one has or uses; it is a relationship one enters. "The gaze is integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge" (1975: 1). Gaze was used by Jacques Lacan to describe the "anxiety that comes with the awareness that one can be viewed". According to Lacan, the subject loses a degree of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is a visible object. Hence, how can the self-assertive lesbian subjectivity become an autonomous subject that can be viewed in an ethical manner?

At the heart of my argument is Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1973). According to Monique Wittig, both aspects of the body, the physical and the psychic, are of equal importance in creating meaning. In *The Straight Mind* (1992), Wittig argues that lesbians are not women because to be a lesbian is to step outside of the heterosexual norm of women, as defined by men for men's ends. "[It] would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women" (cited in Hale 2006: 284). In my paper, I borrow the term "lesbian body" from Monique Wittig to re-assert her "proclamations concerning the essential difference from other female subjects" (Hoogland 1997: 11), not in terms of the physical female bodily parts, but in the metaphysical body and the soul that drives the desiring lesbian body. In this context, I reflect upon the dilemma of the 'lesbian body' in both the medical discourse and the religious one which appear to be two faces of the same coin both in the past and present.

## The Dilemma of Defining the Lesbian Soul

The most difficult question that re-emerges is how to define the intrinsic nature of the *inexplicable* lesbian soul and consciousness. 'What is it like to be a lesbian?' is a puzzle that is hard to define, especially within the complicated socio-political components of Middle-Eastern cultures which continue to deny the existence of an authentic and independent lesbian subjectivity. In fact, awareness of one's self as being 'lesbian' is an intuitive core that precedes intentionality, but it cannot be articulated without situating it within the socio-political structures of the culture. The autonomous lesbian selfhood that pre-exists the experience and that persistently defends her ethical existence is not culturally foreseen. As an authentic core that does not spring from the dominant cultural, social, and political situations, the lesbian subjectivity can be described as a peculiar sense of *self-consciousness*; a combination of an explicit conceptual self-awareness as being innately different, and more rudimentary implicit and non-linguistic form of self-awareness.

Because the above definition would make the lesbian appear as an illusory model that has no place in the real world, I need to locate the lesbian self within the framework of behavioral and affective socio-sexual relations in Middle-Eastern cultures. Depending on the socio-sexual and economic relations among women in most Middle-Eastern cultures, it becomes rather 'insensible' to define the lesbian subject as a woman who merely spends her time with women. Due to the absence of the lesbian as an independent subjectivity, even the lesbian lover can be seen by many heterosexual women as a potential rival by virtue of her being a female, or as a temporary substitute for an absent male lover.

A perplexing question that emerges out of the above is exactly how to define lesbianism, especially in most conservative Middle-eastern cultures where female same-sex relations are normalized as part of a supposedly 'tolerant' homo-social structure. According to the Western views that came in 1960s and 1970s, "being a lesbian is a political act that challenges both the norm of heterosexuality and men's dominance. To be a lesbian is to choose to live a life apart from men and to make women the center of one's personal and social life" (Richardson and Sidman 2002: 2). Such a relational definition does not include the fact that a lesbian is not necessarily a woman who prefers socializing with women in the private sphere, but she is a female whose "nearly all relationships with women must be colored by the possibility of love..." (Hallett 1999: 158).

In Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), the lesbian appears as a woman who surpasses the love of men. But, to what extent is it possible to surpass the heterosexual gaze and to make the lesbian gaze an ethical gaze within the confines of the closet? According to Faderman, "'lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other (...). By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other" (Faderman 1981: 17–18). The issue is that if such a relational definition is applied to the normalized homosocial closets of Arab cultures, all types of female bonding might appear to be lesbian.

## The 'Lesbian' Body: Between the Past and the Present

Historically speaking, the lesbian is not perceived as an independent subjectivity; rather it is treated as a 'grinding body' that symbolizes the clitoral sexual act between two female bodies. A thorough look at Ahmad Ibn Yousef Al Tifashi's (1184–1253) chapter on female same-sex relations in *Nuzhat Al-Albab fima La Yujad fi Kitab* might reflect the spectrum of sexual practices in the Medieval Arab history, but it does not convey any perception of an independent lesbian subjectivity. Al-Tifashi devotes a chapter for 'the sexual practice of *suhuq*' which had been translated by Samar Habib (2008) as 'grinding'; a term which literally describes the sexual act of crushing two female genitals against each other; a term which might describe the fantasized sexual act but not the lesbian subjectivity. Most of Al-Tifashi's stories in his chapter on 'grinders' appear to be narrated by a male voyeur, rather than by a self-assertive lesbian subjectivity. In one of the narrated stories, "some chiefs ask

obscene people, about suhaak ... (I swear to Allah I would really love to know how women grind each other) ... (If you like to know that, just sneak into your house bit by bit/discretely)" (Al-Tifashi 1992: 241). This speculation suggests that female same-sex relations were historically envisaged by the male public as commonly practiced among all women in the private sphere.

Al-Tifashi makes a medical distinction between the inborn *suhaqiyya*/grinder and the constructed one, but his distinction reveals a historical tendency to regard the lesbian body from a pathological perspective as an inborn malady. Moreover, Al-Tifashi makes a clear-cut distinction between the biological 'grinders' who have 'itching' genitals, and the constructed 'grinders' who are fond of women as the result of 'habit'. The inborn 'grinder' is naturalized as having a short vulva, and an itching clitoris. The second type of 'grinding' is seen as "the result of [females'] infatuation with the use of female maids in youth, and they mature on this habit, so they keep on craving for it as in the case of 'prostitution'" (Al-Tifashi 1992: 236). Al-Tifashi suggests that "any 'grinding' that is constructed by practice can be easily eliminated and shifted, unlike the inborn one which is hard to be cured and can never be treated" (Al-Tifashi 1992: 236). The sexual act of grinding is perceived as a taught practice and a social addiction that can be cured.

Even within the confines of the closet, the historical grinders didn't escape the legal gaze. In a letter written by a judge to his deputy in Alexandria, the judge warns his deputy against tolerating 'grinders' and their practices lest they should be preoccupied with it as the norm and forget their 'wifely obligations'. The closeted practice was partially tolerated as long as it did not make the woman forget her 'wifely duties'. In this context, the practice is not seen as an ethical lifestyle that excludes heterosexuality, but it is partially tolerated on the part of married women who fulfill their 'sexual duties' to their husbands.

Al-Tifashi's biological discourse presents a detailed analysis of the debates among doctors with regard to the cause of this "inborn disease in women" (Al-Tifashi 1992: 235). In this context, 'lesbianism' came to be viewed as a kind of a permanent and inherent 'hatred of men' that springs from the length of the woman's womb that is measured in heterosexual terms. In Al-Tifashi's discourse, the *suhaqi* body is imagined as a penetrated vulva / womb that tried different male penises that did not fit well into the woman's womb, so she ended up hating men and replacing them with women. Consequently, *al-suhuq* was justified from a pathological perspective as a remedy for the body that needs 'grinding' to the clitoris, as the patient needs medicine to recover. In such a context, the lesbian desire is seen as springing from the 'labia' which is magnified as an erotic zone where each part plays a role in the clitoral sexual drive of the female body towards another female body. Such a perception of the 'lesbian body' as an itching clitoral body cannot be used as a reliable means of asserting a visible lesbian identity in Contemporary Middle-Eastern cultures. Quite the contrary, it can be used as a means of victimization and stigmatization.

By making an association between itching and grinding, a careful medical gaze is invited to impose its healing measures on the female body. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault observes that "the eye has the power to bring a truth to light" (Foucault 1973: xiv). "The residence of truth in the dark center of things is linked, paradoxically, to this sovereign power of the empirical gaze that turns their darkness



into light” (Foucault 1973: xv). The inferred ‘medical truth’ presented by Al-Tifashi gives the impression that the lesbian body was examined as a patient at a certain time in history. The naturalized depiction of *suhaqi* desire, as springing from the female genitals, turns the lesbian body into a pragmatic one that bears a mere utilitarian philosophy, void of any independent sense of self, subjectivity, feelings, or even intention. Besides, such a biological discourse that suggests curing the itching clitoris by means of *suhuq*/grinding or rubbing, gives vent to a modern oppressive medical discourse.

Despite the limitations of the historical gaze, some modern texts relied on such historical texts, in order to show the necessity of curing the ‘diseased lesbian body’ that escaped the control of medieval medicine. Hence, Ibrahim Mahmood in *The Forbidden Pleasure: Sexual Deviance in the History of Arabs* (2000) asserts ‘female circumcision’ as a ‘remedy’ to the active ‘grinding’ and clitoral body, and to any female bodily activity that seeks this type of pleasure. Al-Tifashi’s perception of the lesbian body as an “itching clitoral body” that cannot be cured or disciplined came to be later tested and re-inspected in a modern biological re-reading. Hence, in an attempt to deter ‘lesbianism’ and to cease any bodily activity that seeks this type of pleasure (2000: 284), Mahmood suggests ‘disciplining’ the lesbian body by mutilating the erotic zones that appear to be responsible for the lesbian desire. Mahmood’s application of a ‘corrective’ biological approach to Al-Tifashi’s *suhaqi* body becomes an exercise on the display of power through the lenses of medicine. In this context, the lesbian body is trapped between the historically inherited gaze that perceives the lesbian body as a diseased body that cannot be treated, and the modern gaze that resorts to medicine to subdue the lesbian body and to control the lesbian desire.

The issue is that ‘grinder’ as a label, cannot be used to describe a woman who has an emotional attachment to another woman, before the sexual act of ‘grinding’ takes place. A closer look at Al-Tifashi’s text shows that ‘grinding’ is a mere description of the material practice of sex between women who are referred to as ‘grinders’ even when they are married to men. The fantasized debates between the historical grinders prove that the concept of the lesbian identity did not exist in the Arab history as a separate category. Most of the narratives revolve around the advantages of sex with men over ‘grinding’ which is mocked as “a house without a pillar in the middle of it” (Al-Tifashi 1992: 246). In one of Al-Tifashi’s narrated stories, ‘grinding’ is compared to masturbation which is perceived as a naïve way of self-gratification. In short, the historical ‘grinders’ cannot be considered to be lesbians in the contemporary sense of the word; for they do not expose a genuine passion and exclusive emotional and sexual attachments to females, nor do they seem to have self-assertive voices.

The historical definitions of ‘grinders’ as ‘rubbers’ or ‘crushers’ make all female bodies dissolve in a fantasized ‘grinding tradition’ that does not provide the independent lesbian subjectivity with any sense of belonging or identity. In *Bareed Mistajil* (Urgent Mail 2009); a collection of true stories by non-heterosexual women living in Lebanon, an anonymous lesbian speaker rejects ‘*sou7aq*’ as a means of self-expression. Though she names herself ‘*Sou7aqiyyah*’ as akin to ‘grinder’, she expresses her confusion at the contradictory connotations of the label that is “supposed to denote sexual acts between two women in the form of ‘grinding’/rubbing... [But]... the verb also means to crush”. ?” (*Sou7aqiyyeh* 2009: 35). Hence, she mock-

ingly inquires: “how in the world is the verb ‘to crush’ supposed to signify anything related to a woman loving or making love to another woman?” (*Sou7aqiyyeh* 2009: 35–36). The questions that raise themselves in this regard: Is it possible for the Arabic label ‘*Sou7aqiyyeh*’ and its multiple associations of ‘grinding’, ‘rubbing’, ‘crushing’ to become a socio-political means of visibility for a modern lesbian who perceives it as an offensive marker of self-definition? Is it possible to turn a socially stigmatizing label into a positive term for self-identification? To what extent it is possible for any other label to be more empowering or liberating?

The fact that most Contemporary Middle-Eastern societies attribute female same-sex relations in the closet to the absence of men, hatred of male authority, slavery, rape, disappointment in love affairs, or even to the need of protecting the woman’s hymens and virginity, makes it difficult to locate the innate lesbian subjectivity, especially when many women still perceive their relations to other women as the result of their frustration in heterosexual love affairs, not as an expression of an innate lesbian desire. Fayrouz who is a student in the American University of Beirut says:

Although I was also attracted to men, my experiences with them were never fulfilling. At one point in my life, I decided to explore my attraction to women. After a year I became extremely disillusioned with the lesbian community but I also knew that if I disclosed my feelings for men I would be shunned and called a traitor. (cited in Khalaf 2005: 184)

Because “what seems to characterize community is a sense of commonality: of a common identity, a common purpose, or a shared set of beliefs” (Sullivan 2003: 136), the newly emerging ‘lesbian community’ in Beirut that is meant to be a place for identity assertion is seen by some bisexual women as a space for ‘sexual exploration’. Fayrouz’ disappointment with the community and her ‘*conversion*’ back to heterosexuality re-creates a new socio-political perception of the ‘lesbian’ as a ‘man-hater’. In such an ambivalent setting, the lesbian community that is meant to give meaning and acceptance of the identity might end up becoming a mirror that reflects social prejudice.

In Iran, transsexual operations are officially suggested as a solution to homosexual desires and transgendered behavior. The female who openly expresses same-sex desires and exposes boyish traits can be forced by the ‘modernized religious discourse’ and the law that is supported by the medical gaze to change her sex. Because homosexuality is considered by men of religion as a sin, the only way for them to permit people who have same-sex desires or trans-gendered traits is by letting them go through sex change operations. The medical gaze in this case derives its ethics from the religious gaze which ‘hetero-normalizes desires’ through imposed transsexual operations. Females who desire females are treated as deviant bodies that can be ‘normalized’ into a sort of dysfunctional male bodies, in order to be given the legal permission to get married to a female. In a documentary about gays in Iran, the lesbian ‘patient’ tells the doctor that she is willing to go through the sex-change operation only because it will permit her to give vent to her sexual desires for women. The doctor tells her that she’ll have a penis and in such a case she’ll be a man, but she won’t be a ‘superman’ in terms of having sex.

Obviously, what matters to the modern medical discourse is the materiality of the body and their attempt to conform to the biological image of the man as a male with

a penis. Such imposed operations preserve the heterosexual institution of marriage as a relationship between a male and a female, and they do not take into consideration the feeling of the lesbian or if she desires to live with a penis to be able to express her love and sexual desires for women. In fact, such regulatory operations might prevent many lesbians from declaring their desires. Those who 'come out' might encounter the risk of imposed transsexual operations, in order to be officially accepted.

Contrary to the official Islamic discourse in Iran that tries to hetero-normalize the lesbian body by changing its sex, the official Islamic discourse in Egypt relies on denying the existence of the lesbian desire and it regards same-sex attractions as 'psychological diseases' that can be treated and normalized within the heterosexual institution of marriage. Let alone the fact that many unofficial Egyptian sub-cultures still insist on female genital mutilation, which might be in their 'undeclared opinion' a means of transforming the clitoral lesbian body into a vaginal heterosexual body. Even when some Egyptian movies tried to shed a faint light on 'homosexual relations', they did that from a pathological perspective that regards them as social diseases. Apparently, all these disciplinary discourses try to find ways to control lesbian desire and to control female bodies in a manner that maintains the primacy of 'heterosexism' as "a way of living... that normalizes the dominance of one person in a relationship and the subordination of another (Hoagland 1988: 535).

### 'Lesbian Ethics' between Islamic Discourse and Nationalistic One

The problematic position of the lesbian springs from the fact that the Middle-Eastern cultures simultaneously work at two levels: The first level is integrated in the Islamic discourse that partially admits the lesbian nature as being innate, while denying the need to make this hidden nature visible as an identity. What is invisible has to remain invisible according to the moral code of *al-sitr*; a concept that signifies the cover or the veil in its metaphorical sense. In Islam, decency is associated with timidity which implies 'shrouding impieties'. What has to be closeted is the practice itself which is seen as an impiety or a 'raffish' act that must remain veiled. There is a *Hadith* which demands that people 'should not speak out their deeds' or what 'God has concealed' (Al-Bukhari 1998: 1173). Henceforth, in Islamic jurisprudence, the lesbian subjectivity is not morally judged, unless the inclination is accompanied by an outrageous sexual practice. Obviously enough, "*Fiqh* does not know of sexual identities and only deals with acts" (Lagrange 2006:172). In such a context, the public assertion of a lesbian identity appears as an unwanted confession of a 'shameful' deed that must be concealed. It can hardly be seen as a demand for an ethical presence and recognition.

In his introduction on Al-Tifashi's *Nuzhat*, Jamal Juma'a the editor and verifier of the manuscript, cites a vague verse from *Surat Al-Nissa* (Women) in Qur'an to prove that



Islam forbids *suhaq* and stipulates some terms for an attenuate punishment that does not go beyond house arrest, provided that there are four male witnesses as in the case of adultery, on the account that it is an intercourse without penetration. (Juma'a, in Al-Tifashi 1992: 32).

Since the private sphere of women is already sanctified in the Islamic discourse, it is almost impossible to bring four adult male witnesses to testify seeing the 'unholy' act. This provision, despite its ambiguity, makes the 'outing' of the lesbian identity a complicated process. Indeed, "Visibility is a trap (...) it summons surveillance and the law" (Phelan 1993: 6).

The second level upon which most Middle-Eastern cultures work, which is intimately related to the Islamized level, but publicly divorced from it, is the nationalistic level which depends on denying the lesbian nature altogether, while politicizing it as a queer socio-political construct that cannot be treated as an identity. In various Arab personal status laws, the so-called 'honor crime' is justified if it is committed by the woman's husband, brother, cousin or any male relative. This murder receives a lenient punishment as having to do with the man's 'honor', and with the sexist pre-supposition that men are more hot-tempered and passionate than women. Under such misogynistic laws, all females, regardless of their sexualities, are held as hostages by a man-made concept.

Under male supremacy, post-colonial nationalism was used as a means of eroticizing women's subordination, asserting power relationship between males and females. In a post-colonial era, manhood, masculinity and nationalism appear as arbitrary and inseparable terms, whereas womanhood and femininity in general, and the lesbian sexuality in particular are treated as alien to one's national commitment to one's country. In *Days with the Days* (2004) by the Syrian woman writer Kolette Al-Khoury, lesbianism is described as "an unconscious reaction against [the absence of real men]" (Al-Khoury 2004: 207). It is regarded as a phase similar to the political phase that "bent [men's] heads" (Al-Khoury 2004: 207). In this sense, the 'lesbian' body appears as a 'feminized male body' or a 'masculine female body'. This hetero-nationalized Arabic discourse turns sexual intimacies among females into a sort of a nationalistic failure that symbolizes the loss of male potency 'after the war of 1967', and a representation of women's 'dire need for real men'. It subtly underestimates female attachments and lesbian love as a betrayal to the national interests of the country.

Thus, while the hetero-patriarchal nationalism was used by the Arab states as a means of asserting independence from colonialism, it nevertheless, reclaimed many of the heterosexual values available in the traditional Islamic discourse. By subduing the lesbian discourse as being anti-national and anti-Islamic, the lesbian subjectivity in the contemporary Middle-Eastern cultures remains imprisoned within the Islamized and nationalized closets that regard lesbian tendencies as obscene sexual deeds or inherited 'socio-historical diseases' that do not represent an innate sense of selfhood. Thus, between the historical role of the female body as 'mother of the believers' in the Islamic discourse and her role as 'the mother of the Nation' in the Nationalistic discourse, the lesbian body remains entangled in the trap of Islamism versus post-colonial nationalism.

## Reflections on the 'Lesbian' in Various Types of Gaze

Within the Arab symbolic logic, the female body is produced and re-produced as a heterosexual body for the straight gaze. In literature, Arab authors discussed 'female homosexuality' through their 'heterosexual gaze'. They saw all females through eyes and glasses that serve the interests of typical heterosexual male-oriented structures. Analyzing the unrecognized position of the lesbian in Arabic literature requires a thorough analysis of some literary texts that reveal the link between the intimate and the social on the one hand and the enduring and pervasive nature of the hegemonic heterosexual gaze on the other hand. Most of the writings about sexuality reflect a concern with the lesbian as a 'pure physicality', not as an independent subjectivity or a 'carrier of self/identity'. They seem to be motivated by a tendency to stigmatize lesbianism, or invest it as a radical feminist tool for women's liberation. Since most literary works treat lesbianism as akin to 'homosexuality', and homosexuality itself is produced as a 'sexual deviance', 'social disease' and 'sinful practice', there is an ethical need to liberate lesbian issues from the prison of homosexuality and the negative discourses that revolve around it.

The Islamic gaze is focused on the body, and heterosexual relations that revolve around it. It does not conceive intimate female same-sex relations as being lesbian in the contemporary lesbian and feminist sense. In Quran, both men and women are asked to 'guard their gaze'. The sex of the object of the gaze is not mentioned. Nevertheless, this 'gaze' was interpreted as the cause of heterosexual seduction for both sexes. Henceforth, it was used as a means of controlling the female body as the potential object of desire for the male who is similarly perceived as essentially heterosexual. Meanwhile, heterophobia was justified on the basis of a commonly repeated *Hadith* which demands that "a man should not be alone with a woman in privacy, unless he is *Muhraam*". This religious saying came to be interpreted to mean that heterosociality between a male and female strangers in privacy will invite the devil to seduce them.

Despite the fact that many feminist authors confronted the patriarchal Islamic discourse, such as Nawal Al-Sa'adawi, they did that from an essential heterosexual perspective that defines the female body as an essentially heterosexual one. Nawal Al-Sa'adawi, who is a renowned Egyptian feminist physician and writer, devotes some works on the female sexuality and its multiple pleasures. Her reflection on 'foreplay, orgasm, and the rights to pleasure', from a political perspective establishes the heterosexual desire as the only norm that is shared by all women throughout history. Her medical perception of the female body in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1958) seems to be inspired by her being a female physician, living and working in the Egyptian society that imposes oppressive regulatory procedures on the female body. When a feminist writer uses medical knowledge in the service of female heterosexuality, her gaze does only silences the lesbian discourse; it can also turn the lesbian into a 'patient'.

Preoccupied with subverting the dominant patriarchy, Arab feminism revived the historical woman in Islam and pre-Islam in accordance with the feminist wishes of modern Arab women. When Arab feminist writers attempted re-reading the Arab-

Islamic history, they re-valued the stories of the past, without exerting any effort to deconstruct their authority over the present. They merely entangled women in a historical framework that repeats the same heterosexist myths which spring from an ambiguous past. Their re-reading became a mere repetition of the Arab history from another heterosexual perspective that favors the historical woman who carries all the attributes of the woman as a mother, daughter, and a heterosexual lover. The presumed authenticities of the stories of the past are left untouched, and the presumed heterosexuality of all females is rarely questioned.

In Ammar Abdulhamid's *Menstruation* (2001), sexual relations among women are portrayed as 'obscene practices' that result from an oppressive past. Female same-sex practices are attributed to the suppression of heterosexual desires and the separation of the sexes in fundamentalist societies. By creating a prohibitive discourse of guilt and shame, the lesbian is projected to the public gaze as a heterosexually oppressed woman. All women in the novel are seen as willing to be engaged in 'group sex' with each other, even when they have no feeling of love or commitment to one another. They are all made to suffer from feelings of shame and guilt. This prohibitive discourse presents the lesbian to the collective public gaze as a mere example of 'repression' in a conservative religious framework. The lesbian is reduced to a shameful and immoral effect of the subordinating social and political circumstances. Hence, "morality" is used as a "tool of political oppression" (Butler in Magnus 2006: 93). According to Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), "social and psychic realities are connected in such a way that the social structure of discourse determines the character of interior psychic space" (cited in Magnus 2006: 84).

In Hanan Al-Sheikh's novel *Misk Al-Gazal* (Musk of the Gazelle 1996), the traditional heterophobic gaze in separatist cultures is replaced by a homophobic gaze. By making an association between a 'lesbian bar' in Berlin which is referred to as "the bar of deviant women in Berlin" (Al-Sheikh 1996: 62) and all-women's parties in the Saudi culture, the writer unites a Western sub-culture with an Eastern sub-culture by a homophobic gaze. Al-Sheikh's judgment of the scene of dancing women is detached from the various emotions of the women themselves and the meaning of their dance in their local cultures. The ambiguities that surround women's playful practices makes it difficult to distinguish between the factitious intimacy and the authentic one, between what is acquired/imposed/enacted by the dominant cultural factors and what is innately idealized, or between the "false consciousness" (Rich 1980: 648). Aware of "the difficulties and dangers of cross-cultural moral discourse", Alison M. Jaggar asserts Nussbaum and Sen's ethical insight that "the moral evaluations of any cultural practice must always be 'immersed', taking account of the practices, the perceptions, even the emotions, of the culture" (cited in Jaggar 1998: np). In equating Saudi-Arabian women dancing together in a closeted society with self-assertive lesbians dancing together in a lesbian bar in Berlin, the Lebanese protagonist does not seem to read the language of the Saudi-Arabian culture, and her comment on the dancing women in an all-women party would seem rather funny, awkward and illogical in a closeted culture that tolerates women dancing together more than a man and a woman doing the same.

Moreover, in more closeted and conservative cultures, closets are not merely controlled by patriarchy; they can even be more controlled by matriarchy. During the

absence of any available male figure, patriarchy hands its power to any authoritarian female figure to impose control and surveillance over other female bodies. Ironically, in *Al-Akharoon* (*The Others* 2006), 'the mother, who belongs to a shia' community in Saudi Arabia, efficiently occupies the position of the absent male authority figure in the private sphere and controls her daughter's relations with her female friends if she "doubts" one of them (Al-Harz 2008: 81). It is also the same mother who does not respect the privacy of her daughter's body and ignores everything she used to repeat "about 'sitr' and decency" when she and another woman stranger "collaborate to strip [the girl naked], open up [her] legs and deform [her] with a nail clipper" (Al-Harz 2006: 285, 284). In that sense, mutilating the 'dangerous clitoral body' seems to be practiced by some mothers against the bodies of their daughters. In such closets, both misogynist patriarchy and phallic matriarchy collaborate in a manner that sustains heterosexuality.

Despite the fact that the author of *The Others* (2006) uses a pseudonym 'Siba Al-Harz' to tell lesbian stories in her closeted community, the writer does not identify herself as a lesbian author, instead she regards the lesbian practice as imposed on the members of her sex due to the sexual segregation in a religious society. Even though the female protagonist confesses that she has relations with women, she underestimates her affairs with women as 'meaningless' and 'worthless'. Sado-masochistic relations with women are described as her ways to affect a break with social values and traditions. Throughout the novel, erotic relations with women are presented as "an expression of a lustful desire for a man who will not come" (Al-Harz 2006: 179). However, once this desired man comes, her lesbian relations end. Hence, her first heterosexual relationship, that takes place at the end with a Lebanese man she used to chat with on the Internet, is portrayed as the most desired end.

Hence, the status of the lesbian as an independent subjectivity in Middle-Eastern Cultures is more problematic than the Western ones that theorized the concepts of 'gender', 'lesbian' and 'queer' in a manner that is still regarded as alien to the complicated Arab, Islamic and Middle-Eastern views and values. Using Butler's argument that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed'" (Butler 1990: 143), the lesbian subjectivity has no place in the nationalized or Islamized politics of identity in the Arab cultures, because there is a decisive intention to reduce it to a 'transitory and meaningless deed without a desiring, loving, and intentional doer', even while imposing restrictions and regulations on them. The issue at stake is how to assert an independent lesbian subjectivity and an exclusive passion for females as a desired end in itself, when both the doer and the deed are entangled within the heterosexual codes of intelligibility.

## 'Oriental Desires' or National Concerns?

Though the homosocial context provided plasticity for homosexual practices, it did not give the single female the freedom to identify the self as being lesbian, nor did it give voice to an independent lesbian subjectivity that does not stem from the fantasized acts in the closet. Historically speaking, 'grinding' is used to describe

playful practices among heterosexually married women, mothers, daughters, and ex-grinders who abandon the practice once they become heterosexually gratified wives (See Al-Ghafari 2013: 164). In such a socio-sexual context, the lesbian identity remains muted, and denaturalized as a temporary form of pleasure. Hence, asserting the lesbian identity requires challenging the authority of history and its presumed truth, re-examination of the heterosexual concept of the Nation, and confronting both homophobia and heterophobia.

In Muntaser Mazhar's *The Forbidden Pleasure: 'Liwat'/Sodomy and 'Suhaq'/(Grinding) in the Arab History* (2006), the author blames the West for the spread of "this dangerous epidemic" (Mazhar 2006: 178). Meanwhile, "the satellite channels in the age of globalization" are also held to be responsible "for broadcasting and propagating sexual deviance (...) in [gilded stories] the purpose of which is sexual arousal and introducing people to the 'latest' methods of fulfilling the animal instinct" (Mazhar 2006: 179). Such an association between Western countries, globalization and pornography on the one hand, and 'sexual deviance' and 'animal nature' on the other hand makes it more difficult to 'out' the closet in the Arab cultures or to assert the lesbian subjectivity as an integral part of one's personal and ethical norms.

The phobia of outing gay and lesbian subjectivities appears in Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* (2007) in which he treats Sa'dallah Wannus's attempt to "out an icon of Arab nationalism" in his play *Rituals of Signs of Transformations* (1994), as an "espousal of ready-made and uninterrogated Western formula" (Massad 2007: 375). By blaming the West for imposing 'the binary categories of heterosexual/homosexual', Massad gives an impression that no such subjectivities exist in the East. However, even while denying sexual subjectivities, Massad insists on asserting the Arab identity as essentially different from the Western one. In an interview with Massad, his book *Desiring Arabs* (2007) is described as "an Orientalism of sexuality" (Pagano 2009: np). Massad's equation between 'outing the closet' and the "colonial propaganda" of "the Gay International" (Massad 2007: 375-6) creates another paradoxical situation which treats the 'coming out' of lesbian and gay voices as part of a 'Western agenda'.

Massad's 'conspiracy theory' with regard to the 'gay international' that is seen as traumatizing the Arab national identity goes hand in hand with Kahf's 'unveil trauma theory' in which "[b]eing stripped of their veil is [seen as] a trauma masses of women in the twentieth-century Middle East know" (Kahf 2008: 31). As in Kahf's argument where the so-called "imposed unveiling" is seen as traumatizing the cultural identity of Middle Eastern women, and making them return to the veil as an "empowering choice" that offers *pragmatic advantages* (Kahf 2008: 36), Massad's critique of "rewriting the Arab past [and] Arab present in accordance with European concepts of civilization and culture" (Massad 2007: 417) might very well end in the direction of demolishing a long history of women's struggle against 'forced veiling', by making their struggle appear as an imitation of 'Western norms', rather than an assertion of their free will. In such a case, "the new veiling" in Kahf's Islamic discourse (Kahf 2008: 35) and the Arab ideology of Massad's discourse can be promoted by the Islamic and nationalist voices as a re-assertion of *tradition*. Given the fact that 'Western' feminisms opened the gate for lesbian voices to emerge does not mean that lesbian voices did not exist in their own cultures in the first place. Rather,



the lesbian discourse provided the means of giving voice to the voiceless in other cultures and enabled border crossing on various levels.

Clearly, the lesbian existence in the Arab cultures is subdued by various types of what I call 'Outing Phobias': the Islamized, Nationalized, and globalized ones. All these phobias interact and overlap to entangle the lesbian identity in a spider web that suffocates it as being Anti-Islamic, Anti-National, and Westernized in a negative sense. Although Massad's closet and Kahf's veil are depicted as having their advantages for those who can playfully manipulate them, they can also be invested as socio-political tools to forbid the assertion of any different subjectivity as being 'deviant', non-Islamic, Westernized. Inevitably, being an Arab appears as the only identity that the 'true Arab' has to cling to; an identity that entails being non-Western, non-lesbian, non-feminist especially if one's feminism is seen as a 'Western' one, and first and foremost non activist, lest they should be viewed "in Massad's eyes [as] 'native informants', aiding and abetting the western 'missionaries'" (Witaker 2007: np).

Talking on behalf of 'Arabs' as one homogenous entity with a unified core, and basing one's argument on the 'ontological reality' of the past versus "a European epistemology" (Massad 2007: 417), Massad's discourse can very well become "the [agent] of the trauma process" (see Alexander 2004: 9–11). Massad's Orientalized perspective seems to re-assert the dichotomy between the Orient and the West in a manner that implies that body politics are 'Western norms' (Massad 2007: 418), and that sexual practices should never be transformed into identities (Massad 2007: 265), disregarding the need for gay and lesbian ethics that do not necessarily spring from the practices, but from the innate subjectivity that precedes any sexual act. Ironically, this anti-Western sentiment with regard to 'sexuality rights' incites the tendency of some emerging voices in *Helem* to think that they must "start becoming more pro-Western" (cited in McCormick 2006: 245). Meanwhile, it puts some other gay voices on the defensive; "We are not agents of the West" (Makarem 2009: np). Clearly, Massad's mission of putting "modern Arabs" (Massad 2007: 417) in a position to choose between an 'Arab' past, and getting assimilated with "Europeans [who] insist on treating Arabs as lesser than they" (Massad 2007: 417) leaves no space for lesbian ethics and re-creates the fantasy of the self and the other as an eternal destiny.

Because sexual practices in the Arab cultures have been subsumed within a homosocial order that does not defy the heterosexual institution of marriage, the presumed 'fluidity of Arab sexuality' was tolerated as long as women and men get married, produce children and abide by the roles expected of them by the guardians of patriarchy. Apparently, not enough distinction has been made between outing the performed acts, and outing the closeted subjectivity as an unacknowledged selfhood that transcends social definitions and seeks recognition. Henceforth, Massad's denial of the need for identity politics helps hetero-normalize the lesbian identity as provisional and meaningless, and maintains the strategy of silence as a means of avoiding any potential confrontation with various local and global powers.

The discourse that relies on the denial of gay/lesbian subjectivities and forces everybody to be fused inside heterosexualities does not provide gay and lesbian subjectivities with any agency. It also presupposes the closet to be a "safe haven for love-making" and 'de-realizes' the need for ethics that cannot emerge without



lesbian and gay coming-out narratives. In her book *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle argues that the “literary history of lesbianism (...) is first and of all a history of de-realization” (Castle 1993: 34).

## The Need for Trans-Cultural Lesbian Ethics

One of the most difficult tasks confronting lesbians in the Arab and Islamic region is inscribing the self as a speaking subject and becoming a ‘viable subject’. The portrayal of lesbianism in Arab narratives, Islamic discourse, and legal texts makes it difficult for any lesbian to express one’s most intimate feelings to the outside world, without confronting several forces that suppress visibility, and control bodies and desires. In such cultures, whatever a lesbian does to become visible, she will remain invisible, denied, rejected and silenced in various ways. As Judith Butler rightly observes in *Gender Trouble* (1990), before any individual can live a ‘liveable life’, the individual needs to be recognized as a viable subject. If they cannot be recognized in this way (because they deviate somehow from the norms determining viable subjectivity), then their lives will be “‘impossible’, illegal, unreal, and illegitimate” (GT: viii, cited in Lloyd 2007: 33). As a self-assertive lesbian, I can say that asserting a legitimate life that can be understood and respected by most middle-eastern societies is almost impossible. In some oppressive and subtle socio-political structures, even if a lesbian openly and constantly challenges the heterosexual norms; she will never be permitted to build ‘a coherent and meaningful public life around her personal lesbian identity’ which is systematically unseen/rejected/denied/ ignored by the public gaze. A lesbian simply ‘does not matter’, and once she starts to matter, she can be subjected to more severe ways of discipline and punishment, depending on the country she comes from, and the socio-political system in it.

The challenge in almost all cultures is not only about asserting a lesbian desire; it is more about living an ethical life that is accepted and respected. As Hoogland observes, despite “a general loosening of traditional sexual taboos is unmistakably part of larger socio-historical developments in modern Western societies, lesbianism, it appears, has not equally enjoyed growing visibility and social acceptability” (Hoogland 1997: 8). Due to the complicated challenges that face lesbians worldwide, the need for lesbian ethics in Middle-Eastern cultures is not merely a socio-political quest for acceptance within the borders of a particular culture; it is more of a trans-cultural quest that crosses the borders of language, history, culture, and literature.

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