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Reading the Familiarity of the Past: an Introduction to Medieval Arabic Literature on Female Homosexuality

My purpose in this brief article is to introduce the primary material upon which my research into female homosexuality in the medieval Arabian empire was based.¹ This evidence is also informative to contemporary theories of sexuality that are being propounded in the humanities. Not only does the evidence I submit inform us a great deal about the sexual lives of Arabic women of that period, but it is also relevant to present theoretical debates regarding sexual identities, which are seen, in the queer theoretical framework, as transient, as the result of “discursive structures [rather] than [being] properties of individuals.”² What I discovered through my research and eventually became very interested in was not so much the alterity (from the modern west) of this previously unknown Arabian past, but how very often it demanded to be understood in terms far more similar to contemporary western epistemologies of sexuality than studies of western sexuality yielded about the west’s own sexual past.

The title of this article and its accompanying appendix not only promises visible lesbians, but the hidden, veiled, disguised, barely visible ones of the middle east. And there is something uncomfortably voyeuristic about this kind of interest in the other,

about fetishising or extolling their difference; it is a politics which can be both liberating and intrusive. I recall a colleague of mine referring to my work as “the epistemology of the harem” because in her mind these were the only viable places for homosexual activity between Arabian women during their hot Arabian nights, in the musk of segregated quarters belonging to some over-privileged military leader, politician or royalty.³ Another non-Arab person, after returning from an Arab African country, commented, “I can see what you mean about female homosexuality in the middle east: how easy is it? The women live together in separate quarters from the men.” These are the mythologies of the colonists; they continue to impose their views centuries after their first colonisation of Arab populations. The cliché is that the homosexualities of the middle east are brought on by the segregation of the sexes, and thus there are no others, like the forever celebrated “modern lesbian subject,” who is “out and proud,” and just adores women regardless of the nature of women’s general relations to men (as oppressed or as property, etc.). In fact, views of female homosexual activity in the middle east tend to emphasise the social “problems” that bring it about, rather than looking at the fact of lesbian sexual desire as something more permanent than cultural contexts render it.⁴ Evidence of this desire, this urge for the female form, is to be found in this exemplary poem, dating back to the ninth century and possibly earlier; it reads:

But my vagina succeeds and glimmers between a cheek and a freckle
Like a dot of musk swinging above the crescent
Revealing a pure mouth, smiling like pearls
In which there is a savoury saliva
Instantly sweet to the taste
And a fine neck as slender as the gazelle’s

From what I have seen of her beauty—
And O how much have I seen!—
I say glory to whoever moulded beauty from clay

To create a perfect creature made of beauty
I came to sip from her and her extreme thirst is at a well

If that is prohibited (*Haram*) then this is not lawful (*Halal*).

Note the religious symbolism of the “dot of musk swinging above the crescent,” that religious image that adorns the present Pakistani flag, which is synonymous with the Islamic faith. The poet also rejects what society denies her by naming that prohibition in itself as something that is not lawful. The poet’s equivocation of sexual desire with the need to quench one’s thirst demonstrates a sophisticated form of reasoning, for no one would disagree that denying a thirsty person water for their thirst (particularly in the Arabian deserts) is immoral, so literal thirst becomes no different from the thirst for erotic fulfilment.

Another intriguing poem reads:

How much have we grinded sister, ninety pilgrimages
More delightful and invisible than the entries of the penis head⁵
And than a pregnancy that pleases the enemy
And worse than that, the reproaches of the censors
And we are not limited in grinding,
Like in fornication, even though it is more
Delicious to those so inclined.⁶

What intrigues me in this poem is the “ninety” years of being a grinder,⁷ the suggestion that this is a life-long process and the notion that “we are not limited in grinding, like in fornication.” If the poetess was a resident of ninth-century Baghdad we could interpret that the reference to “limitation” would mean that grinding was permitted by the Islamic jurisprudence of that period and location, while fornication was heavily punished.⁸ There are several examples that suggest that some women engaged in (at least predominantly) exclusive homosexual relations, but this is most evident in a little repartee between two

women, cited in Ahmad Al-Yemeni's (d. 850) chapter on grinding. One woman is evidently heterosexually inclined but abstains for fear of pregnancy (a *mutqeeya*), and another homosexually inclined woman is imploring the *mutqeeya* to try out grinding. The *mutqeeya* declines this pressing invitation by reproaching the grinder for censoring (hetero-)sexual pleasures with which she is not familiar while, in the meantime, praising her own sexual preference:

Tell her, she who recommends grinding
How desolate is the slit against slit
There was comfort for her in the penis
But she has deviated from truth

I frankly speak of your excuse and I am not indignant with you because you tried to shame what you do not know and you have proscribed what you have not tried.

This material creates quite a problem for presently widely accepted constructionist theories of sexuality that are used for studies of this kind. The emergence, or shall we say the presence of, sexual identities of a nature often understood to be western in origin in the middle east, confuses the understanding that exclusive and reciprocal homosexuality was a recent development.

In *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* I was interested in developing an essentialist project that would enable a new approach to sexuality studies within the humanities, but one which would work alongside queer theory even though it interrogates some of the conclusions of the queer theoretical framework. As Alison Eves has noted:

More generally, queer work has re-conceptualized sexual identities as shifting and unstable, as positions offered by discursive structures rather than properties of individuals. The logical link and correspondence between biological sex, gender and desire has been challenged by theorists such as Butler (1990) so that all gender is seen as necessarily performative, suggesting alternative ways of

examining the particular ways in which lesbians ‘do’ gender and relate to masculinity and femininity.⁹

The central tenet of queer theory has been the emphasis on difference and on variation, and at times queer theory has culminated, as we see in the above, in a theory which undermines all categories of specification as “shifting and unstable, as positions offered by discursive structures rather than properties of individuals.” The effects of post-structural, deconstructive and postmodern theories on this version of sexuality-as-a-concept, has also increased a kind of institutionalisation of studies of difference, where “modern” “western” homosexualities become incommensurable with other homosexualities—where, for example, the Ancient Greeks are understood as lovers of boys in a non-reciprocal fashion, where homosexual relations of the period are understood to be based *not* so much on desire (as we moderns understand it) but on notions that the younger man needs social advancement and the older man seeks the intellectual intimacy that women so evidently were perceived to lack.¹⁰ This is fashioned to be different from our understanding of the “modern homosexual subject” who is characterised by his/her willingness to reciprocate and to engage in emotional and romantic relationships, and is also exclusive. It was thought that no such categories of individuals could have existed in the past, and particularly in the clandestine context of oppressed third world homosexual gatherings and activities.

Michel Foucault has had an enormous and tremendous effect on our conception of sexuality as a concept, which he argued was a nineteenth-century invention. In fact, Foucault is the originator of the theoretical approaches to the history of sexuality espoused in recent critical works. In distinction from essentialist consideration, Foucault wrote that:

My aim was not to write a history of sexual behaviors and practices, tracing their successive forms, their evolution, and their dissemination; nor was it to analyze the scientific, religious, or philosophical ideas through which these behaviors have been represented. I wanted first to dwell on that quite recent and banal notion of “sexuality”: to stand detached from it, bracketing its familiarity, in order to analyze the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated. The term itself did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century, a fact that should be neither underestimated nor overinterpreted. It does point to something other than a simple recasting of vocabulary, but obviously it does not mark the sudden emergence of that to which “sexuality” refers.¹¹

But these Foucauldian ideas *were* over-interpreted in the sense that emphasis was granted to the idea that the history of sexuality revealed “something other than a simple recasting of vocabulary” when it came to the formation of sexual identities and self-knowledge, while, in the meantime, the balancing remainder of that idea was neglected, that being that the recent history of sexuality discourse did *not* “mark the sudden emergence of that to which ‘sexuality’ refers.”

It is precisely this reluctance—prevalent in contemporary criticism—to accept that contemporary vocabulary *can* be used to inform us about the past, to which I am drawing attention. It is not the Foucauldian idea that the concept of “sexuality” has a short-lived history in itself, but I remain sceptical of Foucault’s conclusion that sexuality was *erroneously* “conceived of as a constant” (4), if only because “that to which ‘sexuality’ refers” *is* a constant which can be easily seen, though unexpectedly, in the case study of female homosexuality in medieval Arabia. Perhaps ultimately we are doomed to give a name (an arbitrary signifier as Nietzsche has suggested?¹²) to these nameless phenomena, and though the names may be arbitrary, to which permanent fixtures are they referring? What is beneath the discursive stagings of culture? Female homosexual desire is certainly one of those fixtures.

Misunderstanding Female Homosexuality in the Middle East.

When hearing that I was particularly looking into Islamic civilisation and culture, some people were keen to hear about the gruesome punishments inflicted on those who were caught in the act—beheadings, stoning, hanging, honour-killings: and these things do happen, but not in a magnitude proportionate to the western media’s focus on them when addressing homosexuality in the contemporary Arab world. I am sure that something angled like Irshad Manji’s bereft scholarship in *The Trouble With Islam* would have gone down well, would have satisfied expectations of the “degeneracy” of Muslim nations living in what she insultingly calls the “grip of desert tribalism.”¹³

But my research has not met the expectations of those who sought to be reminded of the inferiority of the middle east when it comes to civil liberties, in a way which was unconnected from the west’s imperial role in that degeneration. In fact, by understanding earlier Islamic cultures and the variety and heterogeneity of contemporary ones in relation to female homosexuality in that region, we come to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Arab world—a world which outwardly appears repressive, closed, immutable, but which reveals dynamic inconsistencies, underworlds of resistance and subversion.

Medieval poetry on the subject of Arabian homosexuality was divided by anthologists of the period between categories of censure and categories of praise. This is particularly evident in Tifashi’s work, translated in the appendix to this article. One example from the category of censure:

God damn you, you unfaithful whore [writes one injured male]

How do you rub your pubis with another pubis
When every house that is covered by a ceiling
Must have a pillar in the middle of it?

While a medieval queer response to this genre of censure was fashioned, it has only survived in Tifashi's collection, and in an instance in the *Arabian Nights* which Richard Burton translated in the nineteenth century:

The penis smooth and round was made/with anus best to match it/ Had it been made for cunnus' sake, / it had been formed like a hatchet.¹⁴

Not only was there a rich collection of material which spoke of homosexual desire, but it appears as though medieval scholars writing on the subject were engaging with concerns over whether homosexuality was innate or socially produced (see Tifashi and Samaw'uli), whether it was an illness or natural, whether it was reversible or permanent.

In the thirteenth century Ahmad Ibn Yusuf al-Tifashi (a Muslim scholar) demonstrates that there was no homological view, no single condemnatory stance being advanced at every juncture of his anecdotes. On the contrary, if Tifashi's sensibility is anything to go by, there was an admiration reserved for some of the women known as grinders, who were often educated scholars of Islam, as well as musicians and entertainers, and who were both slave girls and free women.

Further to their discourse regarding whether homosexuality is innate or constructed, I discovered that medieval Muslim scholars engaging in this subject were seeking to devise categories of female homosexuality. The group of lesbians akin to modern day "butches" were then known as *mutathakirat*, although some of them are very likely to have been transsexual individuals, or, from the descriptions of their hypertrophied "clitorises" (that remind us of the studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-

century western tribades) they may have been intersexed.¹⁵ In fact the whole person of the tribade in the description of “her” physique is more convincing if read as a “male pseudo-hermaphrodite”—an intersexed individual whose anatomy fits the description much better than the mythological “lesbian” clitoris we have been reading through the figure of the tribade, and now may be perceiving through the figure of the *mutathakirat*. Note for example the following descriptions of these “butches” possessing hypertrophied clitorises:

They have said: When she is erect something comes out from under her stomach that looks like a cock’s comb. However this description is not accurate: it is a thin bone which is found above the penis-entrance [i.e. vagina], which resembles the nose bone. She climbs up on the vagina of her passive subject and she rubs her with it. When she does this they both feel a pleasure greater than marriage—the pleasure is greater for the active one. When she rubs against the vagina of the woman to whom this is done, then it emerges quite significantly like baby-teeth, except that it is long not wide, and they both find a pleasure greater than what is to be found in marriage.

In fact al-Yemeni is arguing here that there is not such thing as the “mythological” cock’s comb (or the hypertrophied clitoris of the tribade) and instead he asserts that all men can discover these particular parts of the anatomy (i.e. the clitoris): “And if the man intended that particular place [above the vaginal entrance] in the woman with his penis then it would appear for him and he would see from her pleasure and her disintegration what I have here mentioned.”

Among these *mutathakirat*, there were *women* who did not sport enlarged clitorises but who continued to take on what was labelled as “the mannerisms of the man” and who were also lovers of other women:

There are some of them who exceed others in intelligence and deception and in their nature there is much that resembles men. So much so that one of them might

resemble men in her movements and her speech and her voice. Such a woman is a lover [as opposed to being beloved] because she is the active partner and so she needs someone she can be on top of and not be ashamed to seduce every time her appetite is roused. It does not suit her to have intercourse at the time where her appetite is dormant. So this, together with the difficulty in cumming under the pleasures and command of the man, leads her to grinding. The greatest number of those who possess these traits are among the witty women, and the writers and the Quranic readers and the scholars. Some of them are drawn to grinding due to the intensity of restriction imposed on them, where they are unable to be alone safely and privately except with other women. (Samaw'uli)

Celebrated as the signpost of lesbian visibility, as an alternative to mainstream masculinity, subversive and transgressive, butch lesbians have also been the subject of much ridicule, of having penis envy, of either wanting to be men or of hating and competing with men, or of re-inscribing or imitating a heteronormative paradigm. I could not help when preparing this paper but to see the trope of the butch lesbian as facilitating the search for patterns. Although many female masculinities are not homosexually oriented and many of those masculinities which appear to be female can be in fact male on either a psychic or physical level, nevertheless, we should be comfortable in stating that there are many lesbian butches out there, and a culturally specific approach to the trope of the butch lesbian cannot tell us what the transhistorical and transcultural similarities really mean.

My intention in making this material available to the international academic community is to reinvigorate a debate which has reached a kind of impasse: if everything is constructed by humans and their respective societies, then what is the underlying pre-linguistic something about which we build these constructions? I hope that the material presented in the appendix will help us to begin to answer these intriguing essentialist questions which have been much neglected due to their seeming impossibility.¹⁶

¹ I refer to chapters in part II of my monograph, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 47-83.

² Alison Eves, "Queer Theory, Butch/Femme Identities and Lesbian Space" (*Sexualities* 7.4, 2004), 481.

³ Ironically and significantly, I was not able to find a single reference to harem lesbian activities in any of the medieval Arabic texts I perused.

⁴ This view is not exclusive to western narratives of female homosexuality in the Arab world, but is rather begotten from the view propounded by the homophobic or misguided rhetoric of certain Arab scholars and critics themselves. In the medieval period, it was understood that *some* women were more interested in avoiding pregnancy and scandal and hence resorted to sexual relations with other women; however, this was not seen as the predominant trait or "reason" for most grinders (as it came to be known in the modern period).

⁵ The original word is *Fayashil* which refers to the stimulation of the clitoris using the tip of the penis.

⁶ This poem is cited by Tifashi [d. 1253]. Its origin is uncertain; it could be from any period prior to the thirteenth century.

⁷ This is the medieval name granted to women who engage in sexual activities with other women.

⁸ See *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, 52-53.

⁹ Eves, 481-482.

¹⁰ In particular, I refer to the works of David Halperin: *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and other essays on Greek love* (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Halperin et al., eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Craig A. Williams takes an approach similar to Halperin's in *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* vol.2, trans. Robert Hurley ([Paris, 1984], London: Penguin, 1992), 3.

¹² As Nietzsche famously indicated, "The 'thing itself' (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for." See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense" [1873], in Walter Kaufman, trans. and ed., *Portable Nietzsche* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), 45.

¹³ Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*. Sydney: Random House, 2003. 143.

¹⁴ Richard Burton, trans., "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman" in *The Arabian Nights*, vol. 3 ([Iran]: printed by Burton Club, [c.1888]), 303.

¹⁵ There have been numerous studies that discuss the figure of the tribade. For a treatment of the particular issue of hypertrophied clitorises and its relation to the intersexed body see Theresa Braunschneider, "The Macroclitoride, the Tribade and the Woman: Configuring Gender and Sexuality in English Anatomical Discourse" (*Textual Practice* 13.3, 1999), 509-532.

¹⁶ I particularly admire the meta-historical theoretical framework in Sarah Toulalan's "Extraordinary Satisfactions: Lesbian Visibility in Seventeenth-Century Pornography in England" (*Gender and History* 15.1, 2003), 50-68, and Susan Lanser's "'Au sein de vos pareilles': Sapphic Separatism in Late Eighteenth-Century France" (*Journal of Homosexuality* 41.3/4, 2001), 105-116.