

The Lineaments of Desire in Arab-Muslim Culture: A Conversation with Nicole G. Albert and Lydia R. Ruprecht

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Q: Do some founding myths affect how the gendered body is perceived within Islam? Is there one myth or several about the place of the androgyne in Arab-Muslim culture?

*A: There's no such thing as the androgyne, in the European sense. But we do have literary myths associated with androgyny: *The Thousand and One Nights* is where the concept is best illustrated. And this is such a well-known text, one in fact that Pasolini translated into light and images in the film that famously bears its name.*

The tale of Kamarazaman is that of a young man who transforms himself and changes sex according to the different situations he finds himself in. It is a kind of elective androgyny, not a permanent one. We might say that in these tales, the myth of the androgyne has both its literary origin and its culmination, its high point.

Q: The figure of the young adolescent is the focus for many fantasies in the east because of his sexual ambivalence and indeterminate beauty. But he appears only fleetingly, three times, in the Koran (suras LII, LVI, LXXVI) for the libations where he seems to act as cupbearer. Is this idealized figure in fact a secondary or even an excluded one?

*A: In the Koran the youth appears as a mediating figure who takes on a material form in indistinct, ethereal places like paradise or the other world. In this context he is like a wish-fulfilment, a dream figure, rather than the realization of a desire. However, he takes on more definition in *The Thousand and One Nights*, where we find him as a page, a servant, a young man or even an angel. In all these appearances he remains an intermediate, non-sexualized character.*

Q: While the young man appears among men and the faithful, the eunuch, on the other hand, is found solely in the company of women, in the enclosure of the harem. What is the status of this desexualized figure?

A: Unlike the youth, the eunuch is truly a man but deprived in fact of what makes

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and distinguishes a man. Though he belongs to the female universe, he is 'remote-controlled' by men as the defender of male honour. In historical literature, both folklore and mythology, what he does is in response to male volition. Authors such as Lord Ancillon in his *Treatise on Eunuchs* (1707) have attempted to work out exactly when one becomes a eunuch. Biologically, though he loses his testicles, he can nonetheless have erections, have a sexuality, as shown in the opening scene of *The Thousand and One Nights*. His main characteristic is lack of fertility. But he arouses an anxiety, a disturbing strangeness.

Q: *The character of the adolescent boy [or ephebe] seems to be connected with the notion of bisexuality. What about the young girl? Does she have a place in this concept of androgyny, this sexual in-between?*

A: There is a figure called '*fata*', which you could translate as *mignon* and which indicates 'neither man nor woman'. It corresponds more or less to adolescence, that enigmatic phase in everyone's development when sexual gender is suffused with indistinctness. The *mignon* is borderline female, with a young woman's virtues and appearance: gracefulness, fine features, soft skin. He makes it possible to ignore women and adolescent girls, whom he sort of replaces. He is found in the entourage of poets and princes. He embodies a provisional femininity, just this side of the biology.

Q: *But the excision performed on girls in some Arab countries is also called 'eviration', which comes from the Latin vir, and which you interpret, in L'Imaginaire arabo-musulman, as a way of relieving 'women of their male burden'. So do they have a male element?*

A: This is a psychoanalyst's interpretation; for the people involved – who perform and undergo that act – it does not take on that function. That belongs to the subconscious.

Q: *Does the difference between the sexes also stem from myths? More generally does it have a literary basis?*

A: Differences between the sexes, and the characteristics of the sexual body, have always been celebrated by Arabs, even before the coming of Islam. Think of the serenades that pre-Islamic troubadours of courtly love used to weave for their sweethearts. Poets like Ahmed Ibn Kulayb or Abu Nuwas (8th–9th century) praised and sang of both young men and woman without encountering disapproval. Love transcended the gulf between the sexes in the erotic poetry of the period.

In fact there is no founding myth such as can be found in the ethnographic literature of South America, especially among the Indians, or in Africa, but a series of pointers that converge. Neither do we have a structure like the one described by Plato in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, particularly as regards sexual duality and how the primal being split to give two different sexes. According to that theory the desire for union of two beings who love each other is no more than the wish to reconstitute that single entity, the primal androgyne. I refer you to *Du Désir*, a brief essay I wrote on the topic, where I set out these problems in more detail. In any case, according to

Plato androgyny is what governs the merging of two bodies, their reciprocal completeness. The extreme illustration of this could be hermaphroditism, in which the two sexes' attributes are present, whereas the androgyne achieves this dualism superficially or in a concealed way.

Q: *Does androgyny overlap with homosexuality and in what way?*

A: Both are on the margins of social acceptability, but differently. For a society at whose centre the heterosexual man reigns supreme, homosexuality is classed as deviance. Islam remains very homophobic even though this attitude conflicts with the classical literary tradition, which exalted homosexuality and sometimes associated it with a privilege of class. In fact, Muslim society clearly has trouble with figures that challenge the sharp distinctions governing relations between the sexes: homosexuals of course, androgynes to a lesser extent. Though these two figures are connected with a femininity, an effeminacy that is disturbing to a monolithic masculine identity, they do not have the same meaning. Androgyny denotes someone possessing the signs of both sexes without being one or the other. As a myth of origins it comes first in the chronology of levels of desire; it is akin to an aesthetic unrealized type of homosexuality. Homosexuality properly speaking is connected with a lower category. It is often seen as a substitute sexuality between men who are unable, at a particular moment and in precise circumstances, to have sexual relations with women. So it is associated with a replacement identity. The notion of homosensuality, which would be an unconsummated homosexuality, a companionship, I think is more feasible and convincing.

As for lesbianism, it is inconceivable as a sexuality in its own right because women are not perceived as active individuals. Furthermore there is a general mistrust of the notion of female 'sexual activism'.

Q: *You have stressed the existence of an ancient poetic tradition that sang of all forms of love. Is the fluctuation of the genders, through their foregrounding or sidelining, still being expressed today in art or culture?*

A: It exists in *rai*, whose explicitly sexual content actually caused it to be banned at one time. In that sensual, young, transgressive music that is concerned with profane enjoyment, sexual relations were evoked without disguise and both men's and women's desires were openly expressed with a certain crudity, thus transgressing customary codes of behaviour. Because of the censorship it faced *rai* was apparently toned down but can be interpreted as having a rich and explicit double meaning by anyone who knows how to listen for it.

Indeed *rai* deals with '*houbb*', an effete word for love. This extremely elastic term is stretched to the limit, dissolved, concealed in the phonetics and rendered individually unidentifiable because it is articulated without being spoken, drowned as it were in the music. Thus the modulation of the voice – with sounds that are lengthened and altered – opens spaces for unguessed-at interpretations in which fluctuations in gender also have a place. This trick means it is possible to deal with sexuality in a coded fashion. In this respect *rai* picks up on Arab-Andalusian classical music in which '*houbb*' is the subject of a very sophisticated protocol of evocation and ellipsis.

In this way the discourse of *rai* has been aestheticized and has become increasingly and richly ambivalent.

Q: *How are the problems around gender, which you deal with in your books, received by communities of the faithful, non-Muslim readers, feminists living in Muslim countries?*

A: Reactions are both numerous and diverse. In *L'Esprit du sérail* I wrote a whole chapter on male chauvinism. My purpose was to decode its operation, look at how men seized upon it to make it serve their purposes. From that point of view I am in solidarity with feminists who are trying to construct an autonomous sexual identity, a self-conscious subject and in the end a being in her own right, in place of what is now a developmental phase of a sex, a sort of embryo. How should we deconstruct machismo and show the mechanisms on which men of religion rely (because of the excessive moral weight placed on sexual matters) in order to retain power? By isolating the discourse of 'ordinary' men about machismo and male chauvinists? For though the latter have an almost direct interest in the status quo, the former are just as much victims of the system as women, if not more so. In this task of deconstruction the aim is not to judge all men but to understand the fossilized structures that have gradually led us to accept the unacceptable. Starting with the father's right to set terms for behaviour, and the many techniques for subjugating the female to the established order – which is normally male – an extremely complex web has been woven that is hard to untangle, even for the women who suffer under it. It is in this respect that I am a 'feminist'.

The other element making up male chauvinism in the East is the fluidity with which things are decided. Nothing is ever written down in a document or recorded in a protocol, because everything is divined from the workings of society and the family. Each person knows their allotted place in the constellation of the family, and is aware that their own position involves other precise relationships of power over their own actions and those of others. To rephrase it, the place an individual occupies within the family automatically implies certain behaviours, needs and aspirations that are entirely pre-determined. From the moment that position is acquired, interiorized by the subject and identified by those around them, the rest automatically follows: food, clothing, public behaviour, attitude to the law and transgression, etc. Sexuality is the ideal field for expressing this. In no case can a woman behave like a man without losing her identity as a woman: a man cannot normally take on so-called female tasks, because in others' eyes he loses his chief attributes: power and authority.

Q: *In Africa's Muslim communities, where sexual identities are equally codified, it is clear that 'political power' is not exercised exclusively in public places reserved for men. Private space occupied by women is also a site of power where decisions are negotiated and prepared. Are there points in common with Arab societies?*

A: Indeed, but the problem of representation is still the same. The structures I am referring to are unconscious. If there is a difference between the Arab world and Africa, it lies for sure in customs that are relaxed in the former and still very strict in the latter. In Africa tradition and custom are so strong that neither men nor women have any need to affirm their gender and sexual preference beyond the fact. Village

norms take charge of that perfectly. One thing must be understood. If there are more tensions in the Arab world and Islam, this is because they speak for themselves and for others. They are normative, whereas Muslim Africa still observes the precepts of general Sunni Islam, even if it bends them a little. In one case a prescription is issued, in the other it is applied, people adapt it and go on with their lives. And when a prescription is issued, of course it is questioned and contested. We should not forget, for instance, that in fourteen centuries of Islam there were at least four centuries of war. A common tension governs the links the Arab world makes with its external environment, Islam's relationship with religious anomie, bonds between men and woman, etc. Certainly Africa has other issues which we should not ignore, but it does not have to worry about preaching the 'correct Islam'. The great theologians of Sunni, and possibly Shi'ite, Islam will take care of that.

From the traditional viewpoint it is thought that people already have enough to do coping with the dangers that threaten a community and exorcizing its fears and anxieties. They do not need to take on worries about the harem as well. In fact, women do have important prerogatives within the home, but they seldom get involved in public affairs at the political or trade union level, in debate about ideas, etc. Men saw at once the danger posed by women having power over them or their political aspirations in the outside world; that would potentially jeopardize men's autonomy. So she has the management of the home; he controls and exercises authority outside it.

Q: *Are we still in this situation today?*

A: This schema is already in the process of retreat, faced with changing attitudes and the increasingly visible place women now occupy. Today most Arab countries can justifiably boast of having female ambassadors, ministers, barristers, doctors, businesswomen and even judges. The only fortress holding out, and it is a mighty one I can say, is religion where only male personnel are accepted fully, with women being there just to follow the intellectual and spiritual process as ordained by men. Female spectators at a ritual in which the hierarchy is totally and adamantly male, that may be, but whole sections are crumbling. In some countries women can now marry without a male chaperone or guardian, and the only sponsor they will accept is the one they want and choose. They choose their husbands. They share a home that is often separate from their in-laws'. They go out from the home, they work or study, have responsible jobs, etc. I think that is the path we need to follow. When women understand that men will not give anything up, they will have to fight to take hold of their independence, their freedom of movement and (why not?) their free choice in politics and religion.

Q: *In this march towards emancipation what place do you see as belonging to the private sphere?*

A: Personally I put the sexual level at the very top. Sex is the starting point for everything else. It is pointless to think a woman can become a free spirit if she is still sexually the 'object' to be protected or the exclusive domain of all the paternalists who speak for her. Paradoxically, few women allow themselves to be manipulated sexually, given the female physiology, the nature of female desire and in particular

the power women have in sexual matters compared with men. As it is they have to pull men up, put them in the right place. You see, I'm talking like a Lacanian: '*Pour le coup*' (As it is), '*tirer quelqu'un vers le haut*' (to pull someone up), '*le mettre au bon endroit*' (to put them in the right place), etc.

And we see women passing on sexual knowledge one to another. There is a culture of exchanging knowledge, especially inside the *hammam* (steam baths), where they look after their bodies and their appearance. Teenage girls are enveloped within an environment where they learn to be attractive and even sexual. They come to marriage informed about their sexuality.

Q: *I have a slightly different theory. Indeed I have the impression that for many women desire for the man predominates. If they conform sexually to male desire they are not necessarily independent and fully liberated.*

A: Often women control male sexuality before their own. They dominate the sexual game as it is defined by men. We know this from the many manuals written by the Arab sexologists of the past, from Sheik Nafzaoui's *Perfumed Garden* to Ibn Hazm's *Necklace of the Dove*, via a large number of erotic little publications, among them the short stories about sex scattered throughout *The Thousand and One Nights*. We get the feeling from them that woman is the real high priestess of love play. But this level of intellectualization of sex does not seem to cross over into reality, where eastern women usually seem to be subject instead to the legal and moral dictates and the social protocols inspired by men. There we find the gulf between desire and its satisfaction, order and pleasure.

Q: *Does this mean that women are prisoners of men's sexual gaze?*

A: More than a gaze it is a rigid sociological pattern, the subtle, restrictive organization of society. Since women generally cannot make their own sexual choices, they manage to inscribe their desires in the system's failures, never in its strong points. When the marriage law imposes de facto polygamy on them, they try above all to strengthen their bonds with their sons instead of investing in the relationship they would have had spontaneously with their husbands.

How many women had the chance to tell their parents they did not want to marry that particular man, but this other one? Today, another generation of women is coming onto the 'marriage market' – market or lottery – and making their minimal demands, but most of them end up giving way to the requirements imposed by those around them. True love, passionate love, is still extremely rare. But all young women behave as if it were possible. The word 'impossible' is still too frequently uttered instead of the word 'possible'; the word 'forbidden' still comes up more easily than 'allowed'.

Q: *So how is sexual feeling expressed with husbands?*

A: First of all sexual consummation is a love rape. True, this is a minority phenomenon, but it happens. Of course you have heard of conjugal violence, crimes of honour, kidnapping of certain girls by their families here in France, who marry them off immediately in their country of origin: indeed that is the definition of forced marriage. When the relationship is based on the confidence a woman is able to build

up with her spouse, even in a previously decided context such as the in-laws' family, we are in a completely different situation. That woman and all women, if they wish and manage to establish a relationship of confidence with men, end up with a good physical relationship, a genuine intimacy that can in fact go as far as total union only in a strictly private space such as the apartment if the couple live alone, or the private bedroom if they live in the family, which is still the rule.

Of course there are prior requirements, obligations, but the result is often very convincing. Besides the man can only be truly effective sexually if there is confidence between him and his wife. That is the dilemma of fulfilled sexuality, reciprocal confidence.

To summarize, nothing in Islam prevents a woman giving herself up joyfully to the pleasures of the flesh . . . in the legitimate context of the relationship with her husband. Outside of that context it is impossible, and there can be no argument. Here too, women's enemy is not Islam but men, their most formidable adversaries.

In order to change attitudes action must be taken in the upbringing of boys, then young men, with the aim of reinventing a calm, positive view of women, who are – we must not forget – the principal partners in every man's life. Otherwise the rules will always be the rules of the one who makes them.

Nevertheless, we should note that most women feel sexually confident with men. But men have a sexual psychology and a particular physiology. They have a tempo in sexual pleasure that is not the same as women's. That difference in reaching orgasm makes them rather lazy, which is often translated as selfishness.

Q: *Isn't that laziness part of the social construction of sexuality?*

A: Of course. Male pleasure is itself subject to ideologies of confinement and dilation which are expressed either as over-repressiveness, or on the other hand as wild liberation. Upbringing plays a major role in that construction. Parallel to that laziness, men have to control their passions, their release of emotion.

The great Muslim theologian Ghazali (1058–1111) spelled out how the husband should conduct himself sexually with his wife. Ten centuries ago, he explained to perfection that the woman's sexual psychology was different from the man's. He talked of the phases of foreplay, the plateau, the climax, and so on.

Q: *You suggest women and feminists should organize, make demands, articulate the terms of their battle, but what are men doing? When are they going to ask questions about their identity?*

A: Men cannot subject themselves to self-questioning because they are in the dominant position, being *the* sex in many situations. So it is up to women to get themselves up to speed, to reach the desired level. According to the latest studies it seems that men do not question themselves sexually either. Indeed, apart from making a few adjustments as part of a couple, they are not capable of doing so because quite simply they are not in an unfavourable position. So for the moment men in general (of course there are special cases) cannot hear these demands from women, especially as women, because of their passivity, are often complicit in their own subjugation. In other words, they do not always resist the easy compromise suggested by men, accepting the present situation in return for greater emotional security.

Knowing emotional security is the basis for conjugal happiness, women are prepared for anything in order first of all to protect that situation. That is the emblematic story of Lysistrata in Aristophanes' comedy.

Furthermore, women are subject to a different rhythm from men. Women's sexual and psychological maturity does not necessarily match men's. At 40 he is still ready for sex. As far as women are concerned, they are so pressurized by society from the age of 30 that they have to keep providing proofs of competence: being a mother, a good wife, a woman who has made a success of her social and family life. This explains why, at a given moment, they appear more conformist and more responsible than us men. This rhythm, determined by their biological clock, is interiorized by men only ten or fifteen years later, between 45 and 50. From that age they have to get onto the same wavelength as women, who are the more mature.

Q: Among the new feminist associations in France, many are mixed and accept young men into their ranks, something almost unthinkable scarcely ten years ago. Can we not see in that a sign of change?

A: This involvement has its limits. Applauding women's struggle is brilliant, it allows people to claim considerable openness of mind and modernity, but sharing the housework is a different kettle of fish. The problem is the weight of society, its inflexibility, the obstacles to collective attitudes, the knee-jerk reactions . . . Granted, society is becoming increasingly female. But beware: 'becoming female' doesn't mean forgetting the old sexual pattern, it is merely held in check and its effect is expected to reappear, is foreseeable. In fact this greater and earlier feminization seems to be accepted by today's men. Perhaps a new man will emerge from it.

From this teething stage the exemplary man may be born who will accept women as his equals in everything. But we are just at the very beginning and in this new vocabulary that we have been inventing since May 1968, the hippy movement, the spread of the pill and the passing of laws on abortion (laws which are still opposed in some countries), we are only at the letter A. We still have all the other letters of the alphabet to make up. It will be a long road. We should see it as a promise for the future and not payback for what is due, because our ancestors and even our parents definitely had their own justifications for taking so long to embark on reforms. What we need to bear in mind is that issues of gender and sex will always be one of our most stimulating and promising fields. Now it's up to us to give them a content, a soul.