

Editorial

Iman Al-Ghafari

In 2003, I published a paper entitled “Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?” in *al-Raida*. Many years later, I was honored when *al-Raida* invited me to be a guest editor of a special issue. On a personal level, editing this issue offered me the chance to provide a critical analysis of the concept of lesbian subjectivity from a non-heteronormative lesbian perspective. It also provided several scholars with the platform to submit their views and papers on various topics that had largely been suppressed, misjudged, denied, or misunderstood in many places in the Arab world. Despite the fact that this issue appears to be a theme-less one, the selected papers are connected by a thread that revolves around lesbian issues, social activism, and the dilemma between integration and segregation both within andro-centric ‘Queer’ organizations and hetero-centric feminist organizations. Hence, this issue brings to the forefront various perspectives of self-identified lesbian scholars and social activists, and reveals the multiplicity of lesbian voices and their experiences in the Arab region. Moreover, central to this issue are the challenges of identity politics within the complicated socio-political structures of Arab cultures.

Despite the fact that over the past years literature on same-sex relations has rapidly increased, sexualities in the Arab world have been largely subsumed within a normalized homosocial order. Not enough distinction was made between outing the performed acts to the public gaze and outing the closeted and unacknowledged lesbian subjectivities that transcend social definitions and seek recognition. Moreover, no distinction has been made between the material practice of sex that is void of any spiritual commitment or ‘emotional attachment’ and the innate lesbian self whose intimate relations are in harmony with one’s inner sensitivity and self-awareness. Monique Wittig’s famous statement “lesbians are not women” is a focal point that I rely on to reveal the invisibility of lesbians as females who live outside the heteronormative structures of womanhood, the complexity of associating lesbians with the stereotypical perception of Arab women, and the necessity of liberating the lesbian from mythical perceptions of the female body.

Though the call for papers included various interdisciplinary sub-topics, it didn’t receive enough scholarly works that meet the publication standards. This can partially be attributed to the fact that this topic has rarely been theorized and studied as an academic discipline. This experience of editing an issue that finally ended up in becoming a ‘theme-less’ one made it clear to me that naming the self is one of the most difficult tasks within the system of meaning that reproduces heterosexist assumptions. Though “LGBT groups” in Lebanon played a role in shedding light on gender and sexualities and created a platform for meetings and discussions, they couldn’t really reach the point of deconstructing the stigma that surrounds lesbian self-assertion in Arab societies. Despite the fact that the lesbian-feminist discourse was somehow attractive to several aspiring heterosexual authors, it was used in a manner that makes lesbianism appear to be a needed political strategy to empower heterosexual/bisexual women and their demands for equality. In many cases, lesbianism was used as a means of achieving publicity in a manner that further subdues silenced lesbian voices and over-stigmatizes visibility and self-assertion.

Although lesbian and queer theories are part of women's studies in various universities all over the world, most Arab universities largely remain at a safe distance from these studies that confront the dominant heterosexual politics of the state on the one hand, and the conventional heterosexual views on the other hand. Taking into consideration that most women's organizations and educational institutions in the Arab world are largely controlled by various state politics, any discourse on sexualities has to abide by the dominant rule which favors maintaining the politics of silence, invisibility, and localized national priorities.

In my paper on "Lesbian Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic Literature", I expose the difficulties that confront lesbians in the Arab region in inscribing the self as a speaking subject. I focus on the power of the heterosexual gaze on the symbolic logic. I expose the unrecognized position of the independent lesbian subjectivity through analyzing the enduring and pervasive nature of the hegemonic heterosexual gaze. The principal focus of the paper is the literary representation of "lesbianism" and the lens through which the lesbian is depicted. In order to show how subjectivities in contemporary Arabic narratives continue to be disciplined and regulated in accordance with the dominant heterosexual norms and expectations, I expose new ways of approaching the 'absent presence' of an independent lesbian subjectivity by deconstructing the domineering gaze in contemporary Arab cultures and literatures. In my work, I theorize the lesbian subjectivity from an independent, personal, and subjective perspective that transcends the dominant conflicting politics, nationalized agendas, collective thinking, relational models, totalitarian ideologies, and local priorities.

In "Who is Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?", Nadine Moawad and Tamara Qiblawi reflect upon the new challenges that emerge out of the laws that censor the use of the internet in Lebanon in particular and in various Arab countries in general. The paper discusses the fears of 'queer communities' in Lebanon of new internet laws that would restrict communication among LGBT groups. The article discusses the positive role that the internet has played in bridging borders between marginalized groups in Lebanon and some other Arab countries. It also sheds light on some cases of censorship and defamation accusation. In an attempt to document the history of internet use among 'queers' and Lebanese queer activism, various LGBT groups working in Lebanon are brought to light, such as Meem. The article shows how this group developed in a few years from a lesbian support group into publishing a book, *Bareed Mista3jil*, and *Bekhsoos*, an online queer magazine. It also reflects upon the politics of inclusion, ways of bypassing restrictions, and the relation between the Palestinian group Aswat and the Lebanese Meem in crossing borders and establishing a sort of 'queer resistance'.

In an article extracted from an M.A. thesis entitled "Transnational Activism in Lebanon, Women's Movement: Between *Fitna*, *Fawda*, and Feminism", Sandy El-Hage focuses on the creation of Nasawiya which is a faction in the women's movement. The article "Nasawiya: A New Faction in the Women's Movement" sheds light on the collective approach of Nasawiya that does not follow the traditional structure that revolves around a single leader. The founding activists of Nasawiya started organizing for "bodily rights and sexuality awareness with LGBTI non-profit groups", such as Meem and Helem. The article exposes the fragmentation between differing perspectives among activists themselves, and the divisions that take place, especially between male and female members and leaders. The tendency of some female members to struggle with discrimination, harassment, and the fantasized image of female beauty and femininity among the group members of Helem led many women to leave the organization. Thus, Nasawiya emerges as a sort of resistance against the patriarchal and sectarian political system in Lebanon, and the strategies adopted by the mainstream women's movement. It is an alternative feminist social movement within Lebanon's movement for gender justice and equality.

In "Between Patriarchy and Occupation: Rauda Morcos and Palestinian Lesbian Activism for Bodily Rights", both Samar Habib and Nayla Moujaes interview Rauda Morcos, a Palestinian lesbian who is described, in

an interview by an Israeli journal, as “the first to be outed in the Arab World”. The interview reflects the negative effects of being outed on Morcos’ life and job in her town. However, it also shows how Morcos managed to become an activist for queer Palestinian rights and an adviser who imagines “a queer Palestinian state”. In some instances, Morcos advocates reliance on female leaders and shows how the nationalistic discourse is imposed on her. The questions and answers revolve around the Arab Spring, the role of NGOs, the importance of the cyberspace among “LGBTIQ people”, and the chances of creating a “safe space” for “queer Arabs”. In this interview, Morcos sheds light on the complicated struggles of Palestinian lesbians against patriarchy and occupation.

The issue contains some selected stories from *Bareed Mista3jil*. They all reflect the dilemma of coming out and self-assertion in various religious and sub-cultural contexts in Lebanon. The relationship between the lesbian and her body, her family, and authority figures in her community, her means of self-expression and representation in terms of clothing are dealt with in the selected stories which are narrated by several anonymous lesbian speakers that come from various backgrounds. In “Becoming”, the speaker tells her experience as a young lesbian who grew up in a “very religious Maronite family” and who wanted to be “a missionary” when she grew up. However, she was shocked when she finds out that her unnamed “homosexuality” which was so natural to her is treated as “unnatural” in a Biblical passage. She reveals the sad effects of her coming out to the “school’s Bible teacher” on almost all her relations. Hence, instead of becoming a missionary, she ended up becoming a messenger for love and an activist for social justice. In “God’s Will”, the young narrator describes the experience of coming out to her devout Muslim parents who calmly accepted the sexuality of their daughter as “God’s will” that cannot be changed. In this story, the speaker appears to be comfortable with her homosexuality and religion, and is defensive of both. In “This Land is not My Land”, the narrator, who comes from a “big, traditional family”, describes her realization of her being “queer” in college in Jordan, but who felt inclined to deny that there is “anything” between her and her girlfriend. In an attempt to assert her being “gay”, she decides to continue her studies in the USA where she finds herself defending Arabs and Muslims, though she is Christian. Her final dream is to return to any place in “The Middle East”, that is close to her homeland. In “My Hijab and I”, the veiled Muslim narrator, who comes from a “*Shi’ite* Muslim community”, talks about the difficulty of using her “hijab and its required clothing” as a means of announcing her “dykeness”. Even within a lesbian community, her “hijab is questioned”. In this story, the narrator tries to assert her hijab and her being ‘dyke’ as two components of her identity.

Despite the fact that most of the stories in *Bareed Mista3jil* appear to be personal and confessional, they seem to share an implicit tendency to politicize lesbian identities. There is a constant alternation between the intimate feelings and personal lives of the speakers on the one hand and their national, religious, and sectarian affinities on the other hand. These stories constitute a leap in the field of confessional storytelling in literature. However, in some instances the anonymous speakers appear to be telling their stories to an anonymous author who had the authority to re-write their stories and present them to the reading public. It is not clear why one speaker identifies herself as “lesbian”, while the others define themselves as “dyke”, “gay”, and “queer”, especially when all these terms are never used as means of identity-assertion in the Arabic language. It is not clear whether all anonymous speakers use these English terms to define their sexual identities in their lives, or they are named as above by the anonymous author? Hence, in my own analysis of *Bareed Mista3jil*, I wonder if this collective and anonymous discourse that politicizes the self and censors it will enable the “coming out” of independent lesbian subjectivities that are capable of openly becoming speaking subjects.