
Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East, by Brian Whitaker,
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REVIEWED BY KEVIN TAYLOR

In the past several years, the state of gays and lesbians in the Middle East has been increasingly covered by scholars and journalists. While articles and formal research give varying pictures of specific situations, Brian Whitaker attempts to give a broad overview of the experiences of local gays and lesbians in this groundbreaking work. Whitaker, the Middle East editor for *The Guardian* newspaper, conducted an impressive amount of research in order to examine the familial, social, religious, and legal situations of gays and lesbians in the region. The result is a compelling read that conveys a balanced and thorough insight into regional gay life.

Whitaker structures his survey into seven chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the current atmosphere. Although details from across the region are included, the author focuses on Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia in order to represent the spectrum of attitudes and conditions in the area with specific examples. The author relies on his own readings and interviews to uncover a broader picture of the realities of gay life.

The book begins with an outline of the cultural importance of honor in the family and the perpetual fear that discovery of a gay or lesbian member will bring shame upon the entire family. To illustrate the extremes in attitudes, Whitaker gives examples of families who force their children into psychotherapy with the hope of “curing” them (some even electing to subject their children to shock therapy), and other situations where beatings or even death are very real possibilities. Other families simply rely on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and hope that the son or daughter will appease the family by eventually marrying. Parental ignorance of the issues and realities of homosexuality is blamed for such severe reactions. Interesting here is the conflict between family loyalty and the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment. In the face of the most severe familial constraints and this conflict of interests, Whitaker concludes that some people are driven to emigrate or, in extreme circumstances, to commit suicide.

In addition to examining the situations gays face within their families, Whitaker studies the legal and social realities in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Included in this section of the book is a look at the Lebanese organization *Helem* (an acronym for *himaya lubnaniyya lil-mithliyyin* – Lebanese protection for homosexuals) which is working to promote gay rights in Lebanon. Whitaker also explores the gay life that flourishes in all three countries in spite of legal restrictions. He argues that, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “there is no room for selectively excluding some human beings on the pretext of local circumstances or cultural norms” (p. 110), and that, therefore, local laws and regulations limiting or prohibiting homosexuality are unacceptable. In legal terms, the three countries in question have taken different approaches to dealing with gay rights, with Lebanon taking a generally more tolerant approach. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, by contrast, have worked to repress any blatant displays of homosexuality. Despite attempts to block internet sites in Saudi Arabia or crackdowns on assumed gay venues, and even entrapment in Egypt, gay life continues unabated. In Saudi Arabia, Whitaker notes a certain denial of gay life and a willingness to overlook activities conducted behind closed doors. He finds that there is a “social dualism” at work in society, and that gay life is possible mainly due to the distinction between public and private worlds. Because

of the segregation of men and women, same-sex contact is actually quite common (and even encouraged by these living conditions), but most often a gay identity is not associated with these activities. In fact, Whitaker contends that gay relationships are often easier to maintain than straight relationships in these societies and that homosexuality is sometimes seen as a temporary substitute for heterosexual relations.

A section of the book is devoted to the messages about gays conveyed through literature, the media, and pop culture. Here the idea of homosexuality and gay identities as something “foreign” and Western is explored. Most interestingly, the author examines Edward Said’s notion of Western orientalism and writes of a new form of reverse orientalism. Whitaker relies on the writings of Sir Richard Burton and his description of a “Sotadic Zone” (a zone including the Middle East, in which same-sex activity was assumed by Westerners to be prevalent) to illustrate the historical assumption that the region was sexually more liberal (or perverse) than the West. The author asserts that the opposite is now true concerning gays and lesbians: the West is now seen by locals to be projecting perverse ideas onto this region of the world.

Although homosexual references abound in historical literature in the Arab World, current works generally avoid them. Films, on the other hand, have had comparatively more gay characters or representations, but usually in a manner that incites either laughter or disgust. This may be changing gradually, however, as more recent works featuring gay characters, such as *The Yacoubian Building*, have not caused great reaction or outrage. Local media normally give only the most basic facts of news stories from abroad but occasionally local stories have included references to “Europe’s Sodomy Revolution”, or have given extreme portrayals of gay events (describing gays as perverts or morally corrupt individuals). Local journalists who entertain the idea of covering gay issues are usually deterred by the threat of censorship or concern over violating social norms. Whatever the source of the image or message, there is rarely a human face to homosexuality and individual life stories and experiences are scarce in the media.

The final chapters explore the impact of religion on gay issues and gay and lesbian individuals’ lives. Here Whitaker describes an erroneous trend to treat religion (specifically Islam) as the root of the problem rather than various social attitudes in the region. Examples of varying interpretations of religious teachings are examined as well as the use of these teachings to justify anti-gay attitudes. He highlights the fact that greater acceptance in the West is also a relatively new phenomenon and that tensions between religion and sexual identity have obviously not been erased there either. These sections of the book are particularly well researched and documented to provide challenges to many of the standard religious arguments used against gays and lesbians. Whitaker also researches the predicament many gays and lesbians face when considering a life that is often in conflict with their individual or family’s religious beliefs. Examples of advice given to young gays and lesbians on religious websites further demonstrate the disapproving messages many people receive from the surrounding community.

Unspeaking Love concludes with a summary of the current situation, and with Whitaker’s opinions concerning the prospects for reform. Here, the author challenges Joseph Massad’s assertion that homosexuality and the gay rights movement are a foreign, imperialistic import. Whitaker acknowledges that sexual activity between members of the same sex has occurred historically in a manner different from that of the West; however, he argues that gays and lesbians today are in need of solidarity to fully assume their sexual identities. He also contends that local gays do not merely copy Western gay identities and movements but are forging their own

uniquely Middle Eastern gay identities. Regardless of the country or community, local gays and lesbians will eventually find their own combinations of their individual cultures and sexuality.

While it could be argued that the book should have been written by a native of the region, it is important to note that this work does make a large contribution to a field that has been thus far under-researched. The author attempts to condense a wide range of conditions and experiences into one work and successfully gives a glimpse of the realities facing local gays. Ideally a book of this nature would focus on individual countries or communities rather than attempting to cover a whole region and lumping gays and lesbians together in a single study. The book does include examples of both gay men and women but does eventually place greater emphasis on the situation of gay men (likely due to a distinct paucity of research on local lesbian life). Whitaker's study could have also benefited from more personal interviews and accounts demonstrating the ways that Middle Eastern gays and lesbians negotiate their sexuality and identity in the face of the specific difficulties they encounter. Additionally, the inclusion of some positive examples of gays who have reconciled their sexual identities with their familial and societal demands would have served to give a more complete picture of gay life in the Middle East. Nonetheless, *Unspeakable Love* is an important book for anyone wanting to gain insight into the lives of gays and lesbians in the region.

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Call for Papers

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), at the Lebanese American University, is in the process of soliciting articles for the forthcoming issue of our quarterly publication *al-Raida* <<http://intranet.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/raida.html>>, which will focus on "Women and Scriptures in the Arab World".

We are interested in receiving academic studies and critical essays that revolve around the issue in question. Scripture scholarship is a difficult discipline that is usually offered in departments of religious studies or in different schools of theology in the Arab world. Scripture scholarship, with the

Forthcoming Issue: Women and Scriptures in the Arab World

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- Sacred texts, interpretation, and women's rights.
- Spiritual quest and women's experience.
- Women scholars and the study of Scriptures.
- Sacred women figures in the Arts and Music.
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If you are interested in contributing to this issue of *al-Raida*, kindly send your abstract (250–300 words) no later than April 30, 2009. All abstracts submitted are reviewed by *al-Raida*'s editorial staff and are subject to its approval. Once the abstract is approved contributors will have to submit their paper no later than July 15, 2009. Submissions are accepted in English, Arabic, or French. All non-English submissions will be translated by IWSAW and published in English following the approval of the author.

This journal edition will be edited by Dr. Hosn Abboud, a scholar on *Qur'anic* Mary and a literary critic. Kindly send your emails simultaneously to the managing editor, Ms. Myriam Sfeir, at al-raida@lau.edu.lb and to the guest editor, Dr. Hosn Abboud, at hosnabboud@gmail.com.