

Love, Lust and Passion

Sex and Taboos in the Islamic World

By Amira El Ahl and Daniel Steinvorth

Sex is a taboo in conservative Islamic countries. Young, unmarried couples are forced to seek out secret erotic oases. Books and play that are devoted to the all too human topic of sex incur the wrath of conservative religious officials and are promptly banned.

Rabat, Morocco. Every evening Amal the octopus vendor looks on as sin returns to his beach. It arrives in the form of handholding couples who hide behind the tall, castle-like quay walls in the city's harbor district to steal a few clandestine kisses. Some perform balancing acts on slippery rocks and seaweed to secure a spot close to the Atlantic Ocean and cuddle in the dim evening light. The air tastes of salt and hashish. On some mornings, when Amal finds used condoms on the beach, he wishes that these depraved, shameless sinners -- who aren't even married, he says -- would roast in hell.

Cairo, Egypt. A hidden little dead-end street in Samalik, a posh residential neighborhood, with a view of the Nile. Those who live here can stand on their balconies at night and see things that no one is meant to see. The cars begin arriving well before sunset, some evenings bringing as many as a hundred amorous couples. Almost all the girls wear headscarves, but that doesn't prevent them from wearing skin-tight, long-sleeved tops. The boys are like boys everywhere, nonchalantly placing their arms around their girlfriends' shoulders and even more nonchalantly sliding their hands into their blouses.

The locals call this place "Shari al-Hubb," or "Street of Love." The gossips say that children have been conceived here and couples have been spotted engaging in oral sex.

Beirut, Lebanon. As techno music blares from the loudspeakers in the dim light, patrons shout their drink orders across the bar. Boys in tight jeans and unbuttoned, white shirts, their hair perfectly styled, jostle their way onto the dance floor. The men shake their hips, clap their hands and embrace -- but without touching all too obviously. After all, those who go too far could end up being thrown out of "Acid," Beirut's most popular gay disco. Officially, "Acid" is nothing more than a nightclub in an out-of-the-way industrial neighborhood.

As liberal as Lebanon is, flaunting one's homosexuality is verboten. Gays are tolerated, but only as long as they remain under the radar and conceal their activities from public scrutiny.

For many in the Arab world, discretion is the only option when it comes to experiencing lust and passion. There are secret spots everywhere, and they are often the only place to go for those forced to live with the contradictions of the modern Islamic world. In countries whose governments are increasingly touting strict morals and chastity, prohibitions have been unsuccessful at suppressing everyday sexuality. Religious censors are desperately trying to put a stop to what they view as declining morals in their countries, but there is little they can do to stop satellite TV, the Internet and text messaging.

A counterforce to Western excesses?

Do the stealthy violations of taboos and moral precepts foreshadow a sexual revolution in the Arab world? Or is the pressure being applied by the moralists creating a new prudishness, a counterforce to the perceived excesses of the West?

For now, everything seems possible, including the idea that a man can end up spending a night in jail for being caught with a condom in his shirt pocket. Ali al-Gundi, an Egyptian journalist, was driving his girlfriend home when he was stopped at a police checkpoint. He didn't have his driver's license with him, but it was 4 a.m. and he was in the company of an attractive woman. For the police, this was reason enough to handcuff Gundi and his girlfriend and take them to the police station. "On the way there, they threatened to beat us," says the 30-year-old. At the station, they took away his mobile phone and wallet and found an unused condom in his shirt pocket.

"They were already convinced that my girlfriend was a whore," says Gundi. The couple ended up behind bars, even after telling the police that they planned to get married in a few months. Only after the woman notified her father the next day were the two released from jail. For Gundi, one thing is certain: "If the officer who stopped us hadn't been so sexually frustrated, he would have let us go."

The sexual frustration of many young Arabs has countless causes, most of them economic. Jobs are scarce and low-paying, and most young men are unable to afford and furnish their own apartments -- a prerequisite to being able to marry in most Arab countries. At the same time, premarital sex is an absolute taboo in Islam. As a result, cities across the Arab world -- Algiers, Alexandria, Sana'a and Damascus -- are filled with "boy-men" between 18 and 35 who are forced to live with their parents for the foreseeable future.

There is one exception, and it's even sanctioned by the Islamic faith: the "temporary marriage" or "pleasure marriage" -- not a bond for life but one designed for intimate sins. Such agreements, presided over by imams, are not regulated by the state. They can be concluded for only a few hours or they can be open-ended. But particularly romantic they are not.

Separating the sexes

Another frustrating development for young Islamic men is the growing separation of the sexes. More and more women are wearing modest clothing. Some choose to wear headscarves or cover their entire bodies, and some even wear black gloves to cover the last remaining bit of exposed skin on their bodies.



A porn site on the Internet: 56 percent of young men in the Maghreb region admit to watching porn on a regular basis.

Nowadays a woman walking along a Cairo street without a veil stands a good chance of being stared at as if she were from another planet. Journalist Gundi is convinced that "oppression brings out perversion in people." The men want their women to be covered and veiled because they are afraid of women -- "afraid of the feelings women provoke."

Most Egyptian women now wear a headscarf, but for varying reasons. Ula Shahba, 27, sees the trend toward covering one's head as an expression of a new female self-confidence, not as a symbol of oppression. For the past two years, Shahba has worn the headscarf voluntarily -- out of conviction, as she emphasizes, insisting that no one forces her to do so. But, she adds, the decision wasn't easy. "I love my hair," she says, "but it shouldn't be visible to everyone." Shahba doesn't believe that the headscarf is a sign of religious devoutness. "It's more of a trend," she says.

A Moroccan study published in early 2006 in *L'Economiste*, a Moroccan business publication, shows how paradoxical young Arabs' attitudes toward religion and sexuality can be. According to the study, young Muslims in the Maghreb region are increasingly ignoring the clearly defined rules of their religion. Premarital sex is not unusual, and 56 percent of young men admit to watching porn on a regular basis. But the respondents also said that it was just as important to them to pray, observe the one-month Ramadan fast and marry a fellow Muslim. When seen in this light, young Muslims' approach to Islam seems as hedonistic as it is variable, almost arbitrary.

Betraying the message of Muhammad

Muslim novelist "Nedjma" ("Star"), the author of "The Almond," a successful erotic novel, describes Moroccan society as divided and bigoted. Despite progressive family and marriage laws, she says, the country is still controlled by patriarchal traditions in which men continue to sleep around and treat women as subordinates. It is a society in which prudishness and sexual obsession, ignorance and desire, "sperm and prayer" coexist. "The more repressive a society is, the more desperately it seeks an outlet," says Nedjma, who conceals her real name because she has already been vilified on the Internet as a "whore" and an "insult to Islam."

Men like Samir, 36, a bald waiter who wears a formal, black and white uniform to work, could be straight out of Nedjma's novel. Samir grins at the prospect of catching a glimpse of unveiled girls in his café in Rabat. But in the same breath, he admits that he would never spend a significant amount

of time in the same room with a woman he doesn't know. "No man and no woman can be together without being accompanied by the devil," he believes, adding that he is quoting the Prophet Muhammad.

But most sources paint a completely different picture of the religious leader, describing him as a hedonist and womanizer who loved and worshipped women. Indeed, he married 12 women, including a businesswoman 15 years his senior, to whom he remained faithful until her death. Author Nedjma says that Muslim men today are "betraying the message of Muhammad," whom she describes as a delicate, gallant man. She doubts that the prophet was afraid of female sexuality, as many of the men in her social circle are today.

Even conservative theologians emphasize the compatibility of pleasure and faith -- but only after marriage. They can even evoke the Prophet Mohammed, who said: "In this world, I loved women, pleasant scents and prayer."

This presents an odd contradiction to the puritanical present, which represents a fundamental departure from Islam's more open-minded past and has instead made way for a humorless and rigorous Islamism.

Journalist Ali al-Gundi believes that Muslim men have a troubled relationship with their own sexuality. "Most men only want to marry a virgin," he says. "What for? Isn't it much nicer to be with a partner who has experience?" Gundi talks about his girlfriends who have done everything but actually have sex, so as not to damage their hymens. That would mean social death.

Egyptian filmmaker Ahmed Khalid devoted his first short film, "The Fifth Pound," to the topic of taboo. The film tells the story of a young couple who use a bus ride to be together and exchange more than just a few innocent, tender words. Every Friday morning, when everyone else is at the mosque for prayers, they meet on the third-to-the-last bench on the bus, a spot where none of the other passengers can see what they are doing. As they sit there, shoulder-to-shoulder, staring straight ahead, they stroke each other's bodies. Their only fear is that the bus driver will see what they are doing through the rear view mirror. He watches the couple, fully aware of what they are doing, all the while indulging in his own fantasies.

In his imagination, the driver sits down next to the girl, carefully removes her headscarf and unbuttons her blouse. She closes her eyes and presses her fingers into the armrest. The headscarf slowly slides off the seat. Both reach climax, the girl in the bus driver's fantasy and the boy through his girlfriend's hand. In the end, the couple pays the driver four pounds for the tickets and a fifth for his silence.

Of course, Khalid was unable to find a distributor for his scandalous, 14-minute short film, and even Cairo's liberal cultural centers refused to run "The Fifth Pound" without it being censored first. Even though, or perhaps precisely because the film does not depict any actual sexual activity, it excites the viewer's fantasy -- an especially odious offense in the eyes of religious censors.

An 'Islamic Vagina Monologues'

The Internet is a refuge for hidden desires, even though it offers only virtual relief. Google Trends, a new service offered by the search engine, provides a way to demonstrate how difficult it is to banish forbidden yearnings from the heads of Muslims. By entering the term "sex" into Google Trends, one obtains a ranked list of cities, countries and languages in which the term was entered most frequently. According to Google Trends, the Pakistanis search for "sex" most often, followed by the Egyptians. Iran and Morocco are in fourth and fifth, Indonesia is in seventh and Saudi Arabia in eighth place. The top city for "sex" searches is Cairo. When the terms "boy sex" or "man boy sex" are entered (many Internet filters catch the word "gay"), Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are the first four countries listed.

Homosexuality is more than just a taboo in the Islamic world. In fact it is considered a crime, punishable by imprisonment or even the death penalty.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an imam who lives in Qatar and has a television show on Arab network Al Jazeera, considers homosexuality as an especially decadent monster created by the West. It is against the "divine order," says the religious scholar, citing verses in the Koran that describe homosexuality as a common practice in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Homosexuals are referred to in Arabic as "Luti," or people from the city of the Lut, which is

mentioned in the Koran and the Bible and is described as having been destroyed by God's wrath. The sources seem to clearly support this notion.

As a result, very few gay Muslims even attempt to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation. Most, says George Assi, a spokesman of Helem, the only gay and lesbian organization in the Arab world, are in despair over the fact that they cannot be as virtuous as their religion prescribes.

Helem, a Lebanese organization that is neither completely legal nor prohibited, has its office in an Islamic business district in Beirut, a city that offers greater political and sexual freedom than any other place in the Arab world. But even here the organization faces protests and threatening phone calls, especially from the Gulf states. "Many talk about us as if we were sick people who must either be healed or abandoned," says Assi.

"Shocking, sad" stories

Unlike Lebanon, Egypt is a place where freedom of opinion is always in jeopardy. The country's once-blossoming worlds of art and literature are especially affected. This makes it all the more astonishing that a play could be produced on a Cairo stage that deals exclusively with sex. Even the play's title, "Bussy," is a provocation. It resembles the English word "pussy," but it is also a slang term Egyptian men use to tell a woman to "look here."

And this is precisely what the directors wanted: to attract attention -- to discrimination, lack of respect and mental immaturity. "We had no intention of being daring or of provoking anyone. We merely wanted to tell the truth," says director Naas Chan. The performance was created as an analogue to the famous New York play, "The Vagina Monologues." When the American production was performed at the American University in Cairo, it was met with disgust, indignation and -- enthusiastic applause. But because it had little to do with the problems of Egyptian women, a group of students decided to stage a sort of "Islamic Vagina Monologue" with amateur actors.

Ordinary women were asked to talk about love and sex. "Their stories were so shocking, so touching, sad and amusing that they needed no editing," says Chan. And that was how "Bussy" was created.

In one scene, a girl, her voice choking with tears, talks about the day her mother took her to the doctor, without telling her that he was going to circumcise her. "When I woke up I felt the pain. Something was missing ... the flesh that they had stolen belonged to me!" Another woman describes her experience with an imam who, when she was 10, forced her into a closet and raped her. "When I told my mother about it, she said that I was making it up."

"I was surprised that almost all the stories we got were serious," says director Chan. The women talked about their experiences with abortions, rapes, female circumcision and plain, everyday discrimination. Each of the 50 stories submitted reflects a slice of Egyptian reality. Telling the stories required a great deal of courage, says Chan. The mere knowledge that one's own story will be performed in front of an audience represents a break with tradition. Sexual abuse, says Chan, is considered a family matter, and if it is disclosed to outsiders, the family feels dishonored and believes the woman has been deprived of her value.

Abir embodies yet another archetype in Arab-Islamic moral society. She is 32 years old, petite, dark-skinned and wears an expensive, long black wig. She lives alone in a small but tidy apartment. Images from the days of the Pharaohs hang on her walls next to large, white pencils -- souvenirs from a trip to Germany's Rügen Island. Abir sits on a white wooden couch with pink upholstery. She wears shorts and a pink T-shirt. A tattoo of the sun adorns her right upper arm and she has a nicotine patch stuck to her left arm.

Abir married for the first time when she was 23. Her mother was dead, her father bedridden and she had been making a meager living as a maid. The marriage was a nightmare. Her husband beat her, and on one occasion her mother-in-law cut off her long black hair and hung it on the wall -- as a warning. Abir obtained a divorce and took a job in a bar, where she met wealthy foreigners.

Abir spreads out a series of photos on her coffee table. They show two happy people, swimming in the ocean, sitting on a park bench, shopping in Germany. But when the man in the photograph, a German named Ingo, still didn't want to marry her after three years, Abir broke off the relationship -- on the phone.

"Why should I waste my life?" she asks.

She also has photos of her and Luis, an American, with whom she had a relationship for a year. Luis wanted to take her home to the United States. "A wonderful man, he spoiled me," she says. But then they had a falling out and Luis left without her. He married another woman and Abir was beside herself. By the time she had come to her senses, she had lost her job as a waitress and decided to do what she had done in the past. She sold her body.

"Egyptians pay 200 pounds (about €28), and Saudis pay 1,000 pounds or sometimes even more," says Abir. "Foreigners pay me \$200. Condoms are required." She shows us the results of her most recent AIDS test, which was negative. Without the test she would not have been granted a German visa. Today she is afraid of being alone, says prostitute Abir. Almost all of her siblings are married.

"The police give you a hard time, sometimes for no reason at all. It's enough for them to see an unmarried woman sitting alone in a bar." Prison terms and beatings are the minimum. If a couple is caught in the act, the woman is the one who suffers.

Abir wants to get married as soon as possible. She says that she has just met another American. She wants to take him to the mosque. As a Muslim woman, she can only marry a Muslim man. And she says the American is going to convert soon and learn more about her religion.

When that happens, she says, the first thing she will do is get out of Egypt.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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