

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)

Trinity Publications (Newspapers, Yearbooks,
Catalogs, etc.)

2018

The Body and the Relationship of Sexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern History: An External Critical Review of Recent Scholarship

Natalie Charette

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers>



Part of the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Charette, Natalie, "The Body and the Relationship of Sexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern History: An External Critical Review of Recent Scholarship". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)* (2018).

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/63>

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Natalie Charette
History
Fall 2017

The Body and the Relationship of Sexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern History: An External
Critical Review of Recent Scholarship

Contemporary discussions often hinge upon notions of the body, sexuality and gender, including how we define their differences, their intersections, and how they inform societal behaviors and structures from various times and places. Recent scholarship about Middle Eastern history through the lens of gender and sexuality provides especially valuable discourses on these topics, as they challenge assumptions of binaries and highlight the importance of other social structures. With the understanding of sexuality as an historical and social construct, we can explore the ways in which societies in the Middle East throughout history have structured expectations for erotic behavior and gender roles using categories that are independent of bodily binaries. Scholars reveal that strict identities of male and female did not inform sexual practice throughout Middle Eastern history. What is more, historical analysis demonstrates that gender, although not strictly determined by biology, existed as a binary of male and female in order to promote social order and cohesion.

In his discussion on the way we study sexuality historically, Jeffrey Weeks writes that “all societies find it necessary to organize the erotic possibilities of the body in one way or another” ...in order to “provide the permissions, prohibitions, limits, and possibilities through which erotic life is organized” (Weeks 32). Throughout recent decades, scholars and sexual theorists have reoriented their conceptualizations of these organizational structures from a purely physiological approach to an understanding that incorporates social, political, and historical forces. Even when exploring the dynamic experiences of various cultures throughout time, early sexual theorists operated according to the assumption that sexuality is completely biological (Weeks 30). While these scholars acknowledged the importance of historical influences, they considered sexuality to be a constant, naturally produced phenomenon.

In light of these past preoccupations with the physiological definitions of sexuality, Weeks emphasizes the cruciality of approaching history according to the premise that sexuality is a social and historical construct (Weeks 30). The value of this reconceptualization extends beyond merely redefining terminology. As Weeks highlights, “the most important outcome of the resulting historical approach to sexuality is that it opens up the whole field to critical analysis and assessment” (Weeks 31). Weeks cites discourses on the history of homosexuality from the 1970’s onward, specifically the “essentialist” versus the “constructionist” debate as an example (31). In his study *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, Khaled El-Rouayheb delineates these perspectives to frame his own scholarship. The “essentialists” contend that even if the explicit term “homosexual” did not exist in a particular time and place, “homosexuality” as a concept permeates throughout all historical periods (El-Rouayheb 5). On the other hand, the “constructionists” focus on the “historically conditioned nature of our modern sexual categories,” and argue that the concept of homosexuality did not come about until the nineteenth century in Europe (El-Rouayheb 5). This constructionist perspective exemplifies the fluid understanding of sexuality in scholarly discourse since the 1970’s.

Significantly, scholars such as Khaled El-Rouayheb and Afsaneh Najmabadi expand upon the constructionist approach through an historical exploration of erotic practices and expectations in premodern places in the Middle East. In his study El-Rouayheb agrees with the constructionist view that the Arab-speaking world of the Ottoman Empire did not have the modern concept of “homosexuality.” El-Rouayheb extends upon this position, however, by emphasizing the importance of particular “cultural strands” that informed expectations and practices of homoerotic behavior in this world (El-Rouayheb 8). Similarly, in her book *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*,

Najmabadi suggests that while there may not have been fixed sexual identities in premodern Iran, there were still orientations of desire. El-Rouayheb's and Najmabadi's scholarship explores the structures that informed homoerotic behaviors in the premodern Arab-Islamic world and Iran. Their studies reveal that these structures did not involve sex, or a bodily binary, but rather were constructed by factors of culture and desire.

Both El-Rouayheb and Najmabadi focus on the ungendered notion of beauty as a key factor in exploring homoerotic practice in these cultures. The belles-lettres from the Ottoman Empire described both girls and boys as beautiful, and often poets applied the same adjectives and descriptions. For example, the phrases "an upright physique" and "dark-lashed eyes" could refer to either a male or a female (El-Rouayheb 55). Likewise, in early *Qajar* Iran, artists portrayed beautiful figures of either gender with similar characteristics. In pictures of the "Amorous Couple," it is often difficult for the viewer to distinguish the gender of either individual. Furthermore, Najmabadi underscores that *Qajar* writers employed descriptions of beauty that the modern reader would likely interpret as feminine qualities (Najmabadi 11-13). These non-gendered depictions reveal a conception of beauty that is not defined by the identity of a body, specifically categorized by male or female sex traits. Since figures of beauty often embodied objects of desire, erotic actions were in turn not oriented according to a specifically sexed body.

If a fixedly gendered body does not inform sexuality in these cultures of the premodern Middle East, there must have been other categories that structured directions of desire and regulated sexual behavior. In his first "cultural strand," El-Rouayheb explores sexuality through the lens of the active versus passive role. In this culture, socially acceptable erotic acts were not defined by whether a man was involved sexually with a female or another male. Instead, what

was significant for a man's social status was whether or not he desired to be penetrated. El-Rouayheb explains that men who committed the act of *liwat*, or the act of having intercourse with another man, fell into two categories. A *luti* connoted a man that assumed the active role, most often a pederast who had relations with a male youth or adolescent (El-Rouayheb 16). According to Islamic religious expectations, a *luti* might be considered morally flawed, similar to that of a person who excessively drinks alcohol (El-Rouayheb 16). His decision to have sexual intercourse with another male, however, did not debase his masculine identity if he assumed the dominant, active role. Instead, "*liwat* was simply one of the temptations to which a man was exposed" (El-Rouayheb 21). On the other hand, a *mukhannath*, a man who desired to be physically penetrated, was thought to suffer from a disease or a pathological condition (El-Rouayheb 16).

In assuming the passive, receptive role, the *mukhannath's* desires did not align with societal expectations of sexuality in relation to penetration and masculinity. What is significant, however, is that the *mukhannath's* identity and body is not feminized based upon his erotic preferences. Although El-Rouayheb argues that these individuals were considered effeminate, the way he describes physical characterizations of the *mukhannath* suggests otherwise. For instance, a person who supposedly suffered from the disease *ubnah*, the desire to be anally penetrated, could be identified by "flabbiness, cough, a dull, languid look, dried lips, a fleshy face, and a large posterior" (El-Rouayheb 20). These bodily traits do not categorize the *mukhannath* as feminine, but rather, signify his desire-type. This argument is supported by Najmabadi's observation that "the ubiquitous designation of the beardless *amrad* or *mukhannas* as effeminate in our time reveals the depth of heteronormalization and the reduction of all gender and sexual categories to two: male and female, man and woman" (Najmabadi 16). The

mukhannath was excluded from the category of masculine norms due to his preference to be penetrated. As a result, society identified physical markers that would designate him as a particular type of individual. Significantly, both instances are not dependent upon fixed bodily binaries of male and female.

The male youth, or the *amrad*, provides a second example of a body that does not fall into a category of male or female. El-Rouayheb and Najmabadi demonstrate how this ungendered body informs cultural expectations and directions of desire that structured erotic life. While the Islamic faith did not condone pederasty in the premodern Arab-Islamic world, the abundance of love poetry concerning this topic suggests that this practice was not uncommon and did not clash with cultural standards for masculinity (El-Rouayheb 77). As stated earlier, these cultural standards were structured by notions of active versus passive roles in penetration rather than the male or female body. Similarly, the religious and aesthetic sphere had its own regulations for acceptable erotic practices. As another example of a “cultural strand,” El-Rouayheb explores how ideas of the aesthetic and divine influenced homoerotic behavior between the adult male and *amrad*. According to religious jurists, “what was important was chastity and involuntariness, not the gender of the beloved” (El-Rouayheb 95). Although the jurists did not approve of sexual relations between a grown man and an adolescent boy, they considered the action permissible if spurred by the power of uncontrollable love rather than predatory lust (El-Rouayheb 95). Similarly, premodern Persian poetry depicted *amrads* as reflecting the divine beauty of God, and therefore, the gaze of a desiring male could be considered a religious practice (Najmabadi 17). The fact that religious standards for these types of homoerotic relations hinged upon concepts such as chastity, love, and aestheticism rather than gender highlights the irrelevancy of the *amrad*’s sex.

Although the adolescent's gendered identity was not a determining factor in informing traditions of pederasty, the *amrad's* body was still important in orienting directions of desire. Specifically, the absence of a beard signified the *amrad* as an "object of desire," whereas a full beard indicated that the youth had developed into a "desiring subject" (Najmabadi 15). The beard as a bodily signifier functions in a similar way to the physical traits that marked an individual as a *mukhannath*. In both cases, these signs construct a category for categorizing individuals outside the sexual binary. For the *amrad*, the absence of a beard did not mark him as feminine, but rather as a possible recipient of the adult male's desire. Furthermore, unlike a fixed sexual identity, the presence or absence of a beard was a temporal stage. In this vein, El-Rouayheb points out how some adolescents would pluck downy hair from their face, because "the boy actually enjoyed being coveted by men, and was in no hurry to become a bearded adult" (El-Rouayheb 32). This example illustrates the importance of bodily signifiers in constructing categories of desire.

In her discussion of modern transformations in the nineteenth century, Najmabadi emphasizes that the absence of a beard only became associated with femininity upon Iran's contact with the Europeans (Najmabadi 35). In premodern Iran, the gender-ambiguous nature of individuals in *Qajar* artwork illustrates the significance of circuits of desire, whether they be homoerotic or heteroerotic, rather than a sexual binary defined by the body. Najmabadi explains that "as 'another gaze' entered the scene of desire, as if an intruder had entered one's private chambers, the scene of homoerotic desire had to be disguised" (Najmabadi 38). Europeans expressed their distaste for Iranian's homoeroticism through criticizing the *amrad's* "feminine" appearance and behavior (Najmabadi 35). Therefore, Najmabadi suggests that "concepts of masculine and feminine became centrally structuring categories for notions of beauty, desire, and love, only when gender differentiation became pertinent to these categories" (Najmabadi 59).

Since specific delineations of a male versus female identity structured the Europeans' definitions of appropriate erotic practice, Iranians deployed gendered portrayals of the body to illustrate their rejection of homoeroticism. The *amrad* is concealed and replaced by the conspicuous depictions of the female breast. From this point forward, beauty becomes embodied by the feminine body, whereas before it was ungendered (Najmabadi 41). This modern transition, resulting from an interaction between two different cultures, underscores the concept that every society has its own structures that inform erotic behavior (Weeks 32). A constructed sexual binary should not be assumed to be one of these structures.

Through a legal lens, Judith Tucker's study of Islamic law in relation to gender explores the factors that regulated sexuality in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ottoman Syria and Palestine. In her book *In the House of the Law*, Tucker writes that by studying the "major discontinuities between kinship-based systems of sexuality and the modern systems of sexual categorization and stratification" ...we become aware of "the chasm that may separate our views of sexuality from those of the legal discourse" (Tucker 149). Tucker's work reveals that in this part of the Middle East, the jurists' rulings upon sexual behaviors and structures were informed by the assumption that sexuality was a powerful, often uncontrollable force (Tucker 148). This notion of a constant, pervasive presence of desire, however, was applied differently to men and women. For men, "sexual desire was seen as part of the male condition, among even the great and pious." From as early as ten-years old, a male was expected to harness his desire and be able to consummate a marriage (Tucker 154). In contrast, a female's desire was irrelevant to the *mufti*'s decisions as to whether a girl was ready or not for sexual intercourse. During these deliberations, a judge would search for certain physical traits that would arouse a male's desire, "making her literally an object of desire" (Tucker 156). This legal process reveals a highly

gendered understanding of desire, in which the man's sexual yearnings trump the female's preferences.

Although there was a gender hierarchy, this does not mean that female sexuality was considered to be passive and that women had no agency in the sexual realm. On the contrary, medieval Islamic society identified women as the primary catalysts for *fitna* or social disorder (Sanders 75). Legal discourses and literature described female desire as a dangerous, seductive force that might threaten a man's dignity. The premise for the plot of *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of tales from the fourteenth century, exemplifies this societal conception of female sexuality, alluring and often malevolent. Upon discovering that his wife had dishonored him by sleeping with one of the kitchen boys, King Shahrayar angrily exclaims that "women are not to be trusted" (Haddawy 7). Shortly after the king and his brother encounter a woman who proudly describes her own beguiling nature. Imprisoned by a monster, the woman proclaims that "he has guarded me and tried to keep me pure and chaste, not realizing that nothing can prevent or alter what is predestined and that when a woman desires something, no one can stop her" (Haddawy 13). Thus, the prologue of *Arabian Nights* situates the reader in a world where women are portrayed as powerful, willing adulterers. The tales that Shahrazad spins, such as a porter's encounter with three ladies, depicts the seductiveness of women, while men of various social classes succumb to their charms. These stories reflect the pervasiveness of notions of *fitna* in the medieval Middle East.

Islamic societies considered protecting against *fitna* as essential to maintaining order in their communities. These societies employed the process of female circumcision as a way to keep social order. Jonathon Berkey explains that female circumcision "ensured that these societies would seek to restrain the sexuality of their women," and that "male honor could be

preserved only be preserving the modesty of those women for whom a man bore responsibility” (Berkey 30). It was believed that limiting a women’s sexual desire through genital modification would also diminish the possibility of *fitna*. Although men felt compelled to control women’s sexuality and protect against their alluring forces, medieval jurists warned that operations of circumcision should only moderately modify women’s genitalia. If a woman no longer felt sexually satisfied by her husband after a dramatic circumcision, then this might threaten her chastity (Berkey 33). This compromise highlights that in the medieval Islamic world, sexuality was dually informed by an understanding of uncontrollable desire and the importance of containing these desires.

While sexuality was considered to be an unquenchable force, it could “be channeled in socially useful directions” (Tucker 150). As desire coursed through society, it flowed through two possible categories of interactions: unlawful intercourse or intercourse in marriage (Sanders 74). Tucker emphasizes that the legal union of marriage directed this ubiquitous desire that “might otherwise lead to illicit unions, unclaimed children, and, at worst, a social anarchy bred by unregulated sexual contacts” (Tucker 149). Significantly, the jurists seldom referenced marital sex in the context of reproduction (Tucker 45). This suggests that the early modern Islamic legal system was not concerned with procreation as an explicit goal of marriage. Instead, jurists prioritized marriage as a social and legally binding union that prevented against illegitimate births and mixing lineages.

Just as the jurists did not focus on reproduction, “it was unlawful sexual intercourse and not sexual preferences and practices that occupied the attention of the law and the *muftis*” (Tucker 159). In other words, the *muftis* rulings emphasized preserving the order of a kin-based society rather than placing judgements upon moral transgressions. For example, while the jurists

condemned rape, their disapproval was based upon a fear of unlawful children rather than denouncing a reprehensible act (Tucker 159). Furthermore, Tucker points out that the *muftis* demonstrated flexibility when ruling upon legitimacy. Following pregnancy resulting from illegal fornication, a jurist permitted the man to marry the woman as long as he materially provided for her (Tucker 173). Evidently, the jurists were willing to overlook promiscuous taboos in the interest of protecting the child's and community's honor. Marriage, therefore, functioned primarily as a receptacle of desire rather than the Judeo-Christian understanding of a divine commitment.

Given the importance of marriage in channeling sexual drives and protecting against mixed-lineages, medieval Islamic society considered the social categories of gender essential. As a result, "a person who fit neither of the available categories presented a serious dilemma in a society where the boundary between male and female were drawn so clearly and was so impenetrable" (Sanders 75). In the premodern Arab-Islamic world, the *mukhannath*, an individual who seemed to be neither male or female, embodied this uneasiness towards gender-ambiguity. El-Rouayheb explains that "the existence of the *ma'bud* [*mukhannath*] challenged what was, in the premodern Middle East, one of the most sharp and consequential of boundaries: the distinction between gender" (El-Rouayheb 22). Similarly, the hermaphrodite, or *khuntha*, threatened the medieval social order.

Falling into neither category of male or female, the *khuntha* could not fulfill particular social roles, which were highly gendered. The jurists, therefore, were compelled to assign the *khuntha* a gender identity. Sanders writes that by 'gendering' the *khuntha*, "they changed their focus from the true sex of the individual to the prescriptions for whole categories, male and female" (Sanders 79). Despite the fact that the hermaphrodite's body was a biological anomaly,

the jurists integrated the *khuntha* into a fixed gender category out of social necessity.

Significantly, the jurists appeared to not feel the need to gender a *khuntha* until around the age of puberty (Sanders 78). In fact, Tucker refers to early childhood as an “androgynous period” for all individuals (Tucker 114). This suggests that gender is primarily relevant when a person is about to enter society with particular roles and expectations according to their gender. The fact that the jurists did not gender a *khuntha* at birth demonstrates their lack of concern with natural bodily binaries. Moreover, once the *khuntha* demonstrated a physiological sign indicating a gender, the jurists would permanently assign them an identity, even if a contradicting sign presented itself later (Sanders 79). This further illustrates the fact that specific characteristics of the body did not determine gender categories.

Sanders points out that “where early modern Europeans agonized over the dangers of homosexual activity in a union involving a hermaphrodite, medieval Muslims had other concerns: incest taboos and modesty (Sanders 88). Likewise, Tucker emphasizes that the jurists were not concerned with homoerotic actions, because same-sex practices could not lead to illicit children (Tucker 159). This highlights the distinction between regulating sexuality and delineating gender. As El-Rouayheb and Najmabadi comprehensively demonstrate, sexual binaries did not inform what was considered acceptable sexual practice in the premodern Middle East. Sanders and Tucker also illustrate the fact that the medieval and early modern jurists did not regulate sexual behavior according to whether it was between a man and a woman, but rather prioritized the social implications. Furthermore, Sanders illuminates that the rigid definitions of biological sex do not strictly determine an individual’s gender. However, Tucker and Sanders reveal that in the Islamic world, gender binaries were present, and essential for the order of their societies.

The gendered roles of men and women within the spheres of marriage and parenting were crucial for social harmony. Tucker stresses that the jurists' "view of marriage rested in fundamental ways on gender difference, on gender in binary opposition: marriage was not a symmetrical relationship" (Tucker 40). It is important to emphasize, however, that while this was certainly a patriarchal society, the *mufits* did not rule according to an inflexible legal system aimed to subjugate women. In fact, by emphasizing a women's right to receive the *mahr*, or dowry, from her husband, "the *mufits* endorsed the idea that a woman should enter marriage as an empowered individual" (Tucker 57). The expectations of each gender within the marriage contract highlighted the importance of the male and female's respective roles. It was the man's duty to materially provide for his wife, and in turn, a woman was required to obey her husband (Tucker 63). Similarly, mothers and fathers assumed specific roles in parenting. A mother provided emotional support and physical care to young children, whereas it was the father's responsibility to provide materially for his children and socialize them outside the household according to their gender (Tucker 113-114).

These gendered roles of parenting in the Islamic world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were crucial in raising children who could contribute to and maintain an orderly society. In her discussion of changing perceptions of the *vatan*, or homeland, in modern Iran, Najmabadi reveals an equally gendered understanding of the parent-child relationship that also promotes social cohesion and warns against destruction. In order to inspire national unity, the Iranian homeland was reimagined as a vulnerable feminine body. Najmabadi writes that "to fail one's patriotic duty was equated with failing in duty toward one's mother, and in particular with a failure of male honor in defense of the mother's chastity" (Najmabadi 116). This expectation of filial duty towards the mother in nineteenth century Iran is an inversion of the role

of parenthood as articulated by Tucker. Instead of the mother bearing a responsibility to care for her children, the children are now required to care for the mother. Likewise, instead of the father protecting his daughter's chastity in the process of socialization (Tucker 116), Iranian sons are expected to protect the mother's 'skirt' from foreign threats (Najmabadi 115). Although this embodiment of motherhood reverses earlier understandings of parenthood from the Ottoman Empire, in both cases the relationship hinges upon strict gender roles in the interest of promoting social order.

Fahra Ghannam's anthropological study of gender dynamics and masculinity in modern urban Egypt, *Live and Die Like a Man* echoes many of the historical themes of gender in the Middle East. Much of Ghannam's study focuses on the body, not as a determinant of gender, but rather as "objects of social practice" and "agents in social practice" (Ghannam 22). The way a man presents his hair, or the location of his scars from fighting on the street marks him as a certain type of man in society. Like the presence of or lack of a beard with the *amrad*, these physical aspects function as bodily signifiers. While the body does not pre-determine one's gender, certain embodiments are important in situating a person in society in relationship to others. Furthermore, Ghannam contends that "a real man is not created by or through a simple binary opposition between male and female, but through an elaborate process of differentiation between diverse ways of being and doing" (Ghannam 27). A man is not merely born with his masculine identity, but rather acquires it through an active process of materializing social norms and expectations along the path of what Ghannam refers to as "the masculine trajectory." This concept is similar to how fathers would socialize his children in the pre-modern Islamic world once they reached adolescence, an age where the gender binary became explicit and crucial.

Ghannam's exploration of modern gender dynamics underscores that one's gender is not merely informed by biological sex, but rather constructed through social interactions and expectations.

Exploring how topics of the body, sexuality, and gender interact through Middle Eastern history highlights their nuanced and dynamic relationship. Recent scholarship serves to further challenge the idea of a natural sexual binary, as the historical evidence suggests that the specific categories of the body did not determine sexuality or gender throughout various times and places in the Middle East. Perhaps more importantly, however, these scholars reveal that while interconnected, sexuality and gender do not always operate in tandem. While sexuality was not informed by strict categories of male and female, the social world was based upon rigid divisions of these two genders.

Works Cited

- Berkey, Jonathan P. "Circumcision Circumscribed: Female Excision and Cultural Accommodation in the Medieval Near East." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 28, no. 01, 1996, pp. 19–38.
- El-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800: Khaled El-Rouayheb*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Ghannam, Farha. *Live and Die like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt*. Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Haddawy, Husain, and Mushin Mahdi. *The Arabian Nights*. Norton, 1995.
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Univ. of California Press, 2010.
- Sanders, Paula, et al. "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law." *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, Yale University Press, 1991.
- Tucker, Judith E. *In the House of the Law Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine*. California Univ. Press, 2010.
- Weeks, Jeffrey, and Barry Reay. "Sexuality in History Revisited." *Sexualities in History: a Reader*, Routledge, 2002.