



about fetishising or extolling their difference; it is a politics which can be both liberating and intrusive. I recall a colleague of mine referring to my work as “the epistemology of the harem” because in her mind these were the only viable places for homosexual activity between Arabian women during their hot Arabian nights, in the musk of segregated quarters belonging to some over-privileged military leader, politician or royalty.<sup>3</sup> Another non-Arab person, after returning from an Arab African country, commented, “I can see what you mean about female homosexuality in the middle east: how easy is it? The women live together in separate quarters from the men.” These are the mythologies of the colonists; they continue to impose their views centuries after their first colonisation of Arab populations. The cliché is that the homosexualities of the middle east are brought on by the segregation of the sexes, and thus there are no others, like the forever celebrated “modern lesbian subject,” who is “out and proud,” and just adores women regardless of the nature of women’s general relations to men (as oppressed or as property, etc.). In fact, views of female homosexual activity in the middle east tend to emphasise the social “problems” that bring it about, rather than looking at the fact of lesbian sexual desire as something more permanent than cultural contexts render it.<sup>4</sup> Evidence of this desire, this urge for the female form, is to be found in this exemplary poem, dating back to the ninth century and possibly earlier; it reads:

But my vagina succeeds and glimmers between a cheek and a freckle  
Like a dot of musk swinging above the crescent  
Revealing a pure mouth, smiling like pearls  
In which there is a savoury saliva  
Instantly sweet to the taste  
And a fine neck as slender as the gazelle’s

From what I have seen of her beauty—  
And O how much have I seen!—  
I say glory to whoever moulded beauty from clay



women, cited in Ahmad Al-Yemeni's (d. 850) chapter on grinding. One woman is evidently heterosexually inclined but abstains for fear of pregnancy (a *mutqeeya*), and another homosexually inclined woman is imploring the *mutqeeya* to try out grinding. The *mutqeeya* declines this pressing invitation by reproaching the grinder for censoring (hetero-)sexual pleasures with which she is not familiar while, in the meantime, praising her own sexual preference:

Tell her, she who recommends grinding  
How desolate is the slit against slit  
There was comfort for her in the penis  
But she has deviated from truth

I frankly speak of your excuse and I am not indignant with you because you tried to shame what you do not know and you have proscribed what you have not tried.

This material creates quite a problem for presently widely accepted constructionist theories of sexuality that are used for studies of this kind. The emergence, or shall we say the presence of, sexual identities of a nature often understood to be western in origin in the middle east, confuses the understanding that exclusive and reciprocal homosexuality was a recent development.

In *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* I was interested in developing an

examining the particular ways in which lesbians ‘do’ gender and relate to masculinity and femininity.<sup>9</sup>

The central tenet of queer theory has been the emphasis on difference and on variation,



**Misunderstanding Female Homosexuality in the Middle East.**

When hearing that I was particularly looking into Islamic civilisation and culture, some people were keen to hear about the gruesome punishments inflicted on those who were caught in the act—beheadings, stoning, hanging, honour-killings: and these things do happen, but not in a magnitude proportionate to the western media’s focus on them when addressing homosexuality in the contemporary Arab world. I am sure that something



century western tribades) they may have been intersexed.<sup>15</sup> In fact the whole person of the tribade in the description of “her” physique is more convincing if read as a “male pseudo-hermaphrodite”—

resemble men in her movements and her speech and her voice.

