forthcoming issue

WOMEN AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE ARAB WORLD
The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University

The Lebanese American University founded the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in 1973. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of the first women’s college in the Middle East, the American Junior College for Women, which was established in 1924 by the Presbyterian Mission. The College, which educated Middle Eastern women for half a century, became co-ed in 1973. In order to honor the college’s unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the region, the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World was established that same year.

Mission

- Engage in academic research on women in the Arab world.
- Develop and integrate women’s studies in the Lebanese American University curriculum.
- Empower women in the Arab world through development programs and education.
- Serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women in the Arab world.
- Facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world.
- Extend ties with international organizations and universities working on gender issues.

Al-Raida Quarterly Journal

IWSAW issues a quarterly journal, al-Raida, whose mission is to promote research and the dissemination of updated information regarding the conditions of women in the Arab world.

Each issue of al-Raida features a file which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews, and art news.

All submitted articles are reviewed by IWSAW. IWSAW reserves the right to accept or reject the articles submitted. Those articles that are accepted will be edited according to journal standards.

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Cover Photograph: "Women Against the Night", by Helen Zughaib, giclée and ink on board, 20 x 30", 2009.

Al-Raida's previous issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1976</td>
<td>Addressed Various and Suggested Topics for Research that Investigate Women's Role in the Media, Education, in Art, and Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 1977</td>
<td>Promoted Women and Events that Focus on Women's Documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 1978</td>
<td>Importance of Documentation in the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 1978</td>
<td>Post-War Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 1978</td>
<td>Women Between Reality and Illusion*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 1978</td>
<td>Research Projects on Women's Status: A Pressing Need in the Arab World*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 1979</td>
<td>I Will Follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 1979</td>
<td>The Year of the Child, The Year of Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 1979</td>
<td>Women and Work*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 1979</td>
<td>The Unknown Smiley Symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 1980</td>
<td>Women and Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 1980</td>
<td>TAAT about IWSAW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 1980</td>
<td>Traditional Family Relations in the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 1981</td>
<td>1981: Year of the Handicapped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 1981</td>
<td>Why is a Woman's Liberation Movement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 1981</td>
<td>Talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 1981</td>
<td>A Message to Consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 1982</td>
<td>Future Plans for IWSAW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 1982</td>
<td>Women and Old Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 1982</td>
<td>Freedom cannot be One-Sided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 1982</td>
<td>Basic Education and Female Dropout in the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 1982</td>
<td>You Cannot Set the Clock Back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 1982</td>
<td>What's in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 1982</td>
<td>Women's Participation in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 1982</td>
<td>Elapsed Anonymity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/28 1984</td>
<td>The Beginning of a New World Communication Order?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 1984</td>
<td>Women of Egypt and Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 1984</td>
<td>Special Issue, Women and the War in Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 1985</td>
<td>Arab Women and the Women's Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 1985</td>
<td>Arab Women and Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 1985</td>
<td>Lebanese Women Speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 1985</td>
<td>Equality, Development, and Peace (Rafidat,Nicola, Sarhadi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 1986</td>
<td>Women of Saudi Arabia*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 1986</td>
<td>Women of Bahrain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 1986</td>
<td>The Status of Arab Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 1987</td>
<td>Women and Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 1987</td>
<td>NACAW: Fourteen Years of Sustained Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 1987</td>
<td>Arab Women and Economic Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 1987</td>
<td>Women's Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 1988</td>
<td>Women's Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44/45 1988</td>
<td>Women and Liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 1988</td>
<td>Women and Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47 1988</td>
<td>Women in Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 1988</td>
<td>Women in Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 1989</td>
<td>Women in Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 1989</td>
<td>Women in Charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 1989</td>
<td>Women: Where, When, and How</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 1991</td>
<td>Lebanese Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 1991</td>
<td>African Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54 1991</td>
<td>Neat Married Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 1991</td>
<td>Women Contributing to a Better World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 1992</td>
<td>Women and the Environment Conference*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58/59 1994</td>
<td>Women's Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 1993</td>
<td>Why Feminism*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 1993</td>
<td>What About Career Woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 1993</td>
<td>Young Woman of Lebanon in the Post-War Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63 1993</td>
<td>Women = Family in 1994*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64 1994</td>
<td>Arab Women and Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66/67 1994</td>
<td>Women's Rights in Lebanon*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67 1994</td>
<td>Women's Health in Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68 1995</td>
<td>Women &amp; Education in Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69 1995</td>
<td>Arab Women in Management*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70/71 1995</td>
<td>Women in Post-War Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 1996</td>
<td>Women, The Media and Sustainable Human Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73 1996</td>
<td>Arab Women in the Fine Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74/75 1996</td>
<td>Women's Rights Are Human Rights: Perspectives from the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 1997</td>
<td>Women in the Arab Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77 1997</td>
<td>Arab Women and Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78 1997</td>
<td>Women and Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 1997</td>
<td>Women and Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80/81 1998</td>
<td>Arab Countries and CDEW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82 1998</td>
<td>Women in the Labor Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83/84 1998-1999</td>
<td>Women's Lives in Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85/86 1999</td>
<td>International Year for Older Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87/88 1999</td>
<td>Arab Women and Cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89 2000</td>
<td>Arab Women and the Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 2000</td>
<td>On Violations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91 2000</td>
<td>Democratic Centers in the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92 2001</td>
<td>Breastfeeding Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93/94 2001</td>
<td>Marriage Patterns in the Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95/96 2002</td>
<td>Immigrant Arab Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97/98 2002</td>
<td>Immigrant Arab Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Editorial
Iman Al-Ghafari

File

IMAN AL-GHAFARI
The Lesbian Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic Literature: ‘An Absent Presence’ Disciplined by the Gaze

NADINE MOAWAD AND TAMARA QIBLAWI
Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?

SANDY EL-HAGE
Nasawiya: A New Faction in the Women’s Movement

SAMAR HABIB AND NAYLA MOUJAES
Between Patriarchy and Occupation: Rauda Morcos and Palestinian Lesbian Activism for Bodily Rights.

SHORT STORIES FROM BAREED MISTA3JIL
- Becoming
- God’s Will
- This Land is not my Land
- My Hijab and I

Young Scholars

MONA KAZZAZ
Women’s Resistance to Hostile Spaces

ANNA KOKKO
Escaped from the Harem, Trapped in the Orient: An analysis of the multiple gazes in Nadine Labaki’s movie “Where Do We Go Now?”

Book Reviews

SYRINE HOUT, Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora (reviewed by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)
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.

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The Lesbian Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic Literature:

‘An Absent Presence’ Disciplined by the Gaze

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The subject of lesbianism is rarely addressed in contemporary Arabic literature, without inciting prejudice, denial, or repetition of some preconceived ideas about the widely used term, “homosexuality”. Even after the emergence of Arab feminism, ‘lesbian subjectivity’ is totally silenced on the assumption that sexuality is not a ‘priority’ in a male-oriented world in which ‘women’ have more vital concerns to fight for than what is seen as ‘bodily rights’, or rights to ‘pleasure’. Some authors presume that there are no lesbians in Arab cultures. Others claim that some women ‘become’ lesbians due to negative experiences or imposed sexual segregation. Set within the limits of female bonding in heterosexual norms, most Arab writings about intimate same-sex relations among females tend to convey an implicit message that lesbians are women who can be heteronormalized once their circumstances change. All these assumptions and misconceptions regulate the public opinion and subdue any attempt to assert an independent lesbian subjectivity that has different priorities, ethics, rights, and politics.

Subjectivity and freedom to assert one’s individuality are essential concepts of any philosophy. To this day, lesbian philosophy remains a Euro-American and feminist one that is rarely approached by Arab scholars. Though lesbian philosophy is still restricted to thought and theories by Western feminist thinkers, it provides me with several theoretical tools to analyze the operation of meaning-making in Arab narratives that use the discourse of deviance and abnormality as a means of consolidating the heterosexualized meanings of subjectivity. While delving into the emergence of lesbian literature and philosophy in Western cultures, I increasingly realized that the status of the lesbian as an independent subjectivity in Arab cultures is more problematic than the Western ones that theorized the concepts of ‘gender’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ in a manner that is still regarded as alien to Arab values.

According to Lillian Faderman (1981), “‘Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other... By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other” (pp. 17-18). Such a definition, if applied to female same-sex relations in the normalized homosocial closets of Arab cultures, might make all types of female bonding appear to be lesbian. Nevertheless, I find many of the definitions that are available in Western lesbian studies to be of central importance to my analysis of the
concept of the lesbian subjectivity as an abstract priori and intuitive core that precedes intentionality, signification, literary representation, and self-identification.

One of the most difficult tasks confronting lesbians in the Arab region is inscribing themselves/ourselves as speaking subjects. In the narratives of Arab writers, the lesbian dissolves in the realm of fiction as a fuzzy and illusory figure. Such a portrayal makes it almost impossible for any lesbian to express one's peculiar and most intimate feelings to the outside world. Deprived of the means of self-expression in the system of meaning, excluded from discourse and confined in it at the same time, how can a lesbian subjectivity become a speaking subject?

Within the Arab symbolic logic, the female body is produced and re-produced as a heterosexual object for the public gaze. Hence, when Arab authors discussed ‘female homosexuality’, they did that through what I call “the heterosexual gaze”. In other words, they saw all females through eyes and glasses that serve the interests of typical male-oriented structures. In this paper, I focus on the power of “the heterosexual gaze” from a lesbian perspective that recognizes the discrete layers of oppression that face signification and self-assertion. The principal focus of this paper is on the literary representations of lesbianism and the lens through which the lesbian is depicted. I show how same-sex intimacies in contemporary Arabic narratives are shaped in accordance with the dominant heterosexual expectations. The lesbian, as represented in such narratives, becomes a woman who might be able to ‘surpass the love of men’, but cannot surpass the power of their heterosexual gaze. I try in this article to propose new ways of approaching the ‘absent presence of the lesbian subjectivity’ by deconstructing the available diagnosis of female same-sex relations in contemporary Arabic literature.

Despite the necessity of writing about lesbian issues, the paper demonstrates the complexities inherent in giving voice to lesbian experiences by non-lesbian authors. According to Bonnie Zimmerman’s definition, contemporary lesbian fiction must be written by self-declared lesbians, because “the nature of lesbian fiction makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it” (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 52). The lesbian novel places “love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of the story” (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 15). Zimmerman’s definition reveals the absence of lesbian literature in Arabic, especially when one can hardly find an Arab female writer “who declares herself to be a lesbian” (as cited in Haggerty, 1995, p. 15).

Seen in the above light, the lesbian novel does not exist in Arabic literature. Though ‘lesbian literature’ in Arabic has no officially recorded history, the topic of lesbianism recently emerged as part of the literature on women. Most of the writings about lesbianism reflect a concern with the lesbian as a “pure physicality”, not as “the carrier of self/identity”. The emergence of Arabic literature on ‘female homosexuality’ during the past few years constitutes a leap in sexuality studies. However, most of the works written about female same-sex relations seem to be motivated by a tendency to stigmatize lesbianism or to portray it as a radical feminist tool for women’s liberation. By confining same-sex practices to an obscure private sphere, Arabic literature exposes the lesbian to a heterosexist and male-oriented gaze that makes it difficult for her to become visible, public, and comprehensible. In Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female*
Homosexuality and Modern Culture (1993), “the lesbian is a spectral figure... she appears as something incidental, impalpable, fleeting, or obscured, not as something solidly in the world” (as cited in Hesford, 2005, p. 228). Hence, analyzing the unrecognized position of the lesbian in Arabic literature requires a thorough analysis of some literary texts that reveal the link between the intimate and the social on the one hand and the enduring and pervasive nature of the hegemonic heterosexual gaze on the other hand. In Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives (1996), Farwell repeats the words of “Judith Roof and Elizabeth Meese [who] ask whether it is possible to narrate lesbian in a plot system which is already overdetermined as male and heterosexual” (p. 9).

Despite the “death of the author” in the twentieth century, the meanings given by Arab authors remain historically and socially determined. Even when the role of the author disappears as a producer of truth in Foucault’s “What is an author?”, Arab authors still play a role in recycling conventional ideology through a cautionary narrative that “is governed by paradigms and codes that are not innocent” (Faderman, 1981, p. 15). Hence, it is important to show how the discourses of lesbian sexuality are negotiated and contested through the production of particular interpretative literary works which are key parts in the construction of the collective discourse about lesbianism as a “sexual deviance”, “social disease”, and “sinful practice” in contemporary Arabic literature.

A closer look at one of the so-called “censored poems” of Nizar Qabbani, renowned as “the poet of love”, reflects the power of the male heterosexual gaze to penetrate a discrete place. In “The Evil Poem”, Qabbani is praised by many Arab critics as being worthy of his nickname “the evil boy”, for “invading the harem and defying sexual taboos” (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, pp. 113-114). By describing an eroticized encounter between two female lovers on a rainy night; a lustful encounter that nobody witnesses but the “I” of the poem and the “lamplight”, the poet asserts the powerful role of the author, not only as the one who sees what takes place in the dark, but also the one who knows the subjective feelings of lesbian lovers. The two female bodies are eroticized in “a dialogue between four breasts, sucking wolves, birds, nails, hair, nipples, silky heaps...” (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, pp. 114-118). Qabbani’s voyeuristic attitude towards the encounter between two female bodies asserts the omnipresent male-oriented perspective that has the power to unlock the closed door of the fantasized “harem” and to liberate it in his own words, or to close it and to control it whenever he wants, for he seems to be the owner of the ‘key’ that allows him to enter any space at any time. In other words, he can be the jailor and the liberator at the same time. Hence, Qabbani’s use of sex is “as little more than a tattered cover for the affirmation of male power, imposing a male-oriented ‘sexual liberation’ on women” (Weeks, 1995, p. 35).

The concentration on the feminine contours of the female body, and the maternal image of suckling put the poet in the position of the desiring male who looks at this scene while fantasizing his place in it. Female lovers appear as silent hostages in a fantasized harem. They are turned into fetishistic love objects for voyeuristic male audience/readers via a phallic gaze that imposes a new form of heterosexual regulation and control of lesbian love. Using a male tongue to give voice to an imagined feminine jouissance, “an ‘instinctual economy’ that cannot be identified by a man” (Cixous, 1986, p. 88), the poem becomes a phallic narrative of the most intimate and
inexpressible feelings between two female lovers. The gaze of the author is so profound that the lesbian body becomes the object of desire to a wider penetrative heterosexual gaze. At the end of the poem, the male narrator becomes impatient with the process of love-making that does not lead to penetration. Therefore, the phallic voice of the male narrator intervenes and demands in an orderly manner: “Tear off the silk/ye lover of silk” (as cited in Nasrallah, 2003, p. 118). It is worth noting that silk exists in the “erotic imagination as a feminine source of pleasure, genital erection and female orgasm” (Rosario, 1997, p. 113). In this context, the poet appears as a director of a scene that fulfills the phallocentric identification of a desiring heterosexual gaze.

Obviously, the relationship between the male poet and the two female lovers is portrayed in a manner that asserts the desiring position of the poet as the one who sucks their breasts. By comparing them to “she-wolves” suckling each other, the poet “produces a hallucinatory metaphor. There is fear and fascination” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45); fear of the female body and fascination with maternal love. Hence, the male poet becomes the “representative of the paternal function [who] takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45). Unlike typical patriarchal cultures that exclude the feminine, Qabbani does not exclude the maternal; rather he successfully integrates the maternal body in the construction of his own patriarchy, as much as he integrates lesbianism in the assertion of heterosexuality. In such a discourse, lesbianism is equated with womanhood, femininity, and self-regulating heteronormative assumptions associated with the female body. The male author becomes the one who does not only know what women want, but what lesbian lovers want.

Similarly, Nihad Seeras’ Halett Shagaff (i.e. A Case of Passion, 1998) depicts all-women’s parties in Aleppo as wild ones in which women get involved in obscene affairs. Details about women kissing, dancing, rubbing and scrubbing the bodies of each other from underneath the covers are narrated by a male peeper. The female dancer is perceived as a potential heterosexual love object for a male viewer and narrator. Even when the male narrator is told that the dancer is “lesbian”, he continues to pursue her, disregarding her lesbian sexuality which does not seem to make any sense to him. Within the system of meaning in which the female body is bound up with heteronormative assumptions, the lesbian “riddle” is typically fantasized as an excessively erotic body, and is made visible by an omnipresent male viewer who reproduces it as a source of pleasure to heterosexual viewers.

The portrayal of lesbianism as an “obscene practice” that results from an oppressive past is repeated in Ammar Abdulhamid’s Menstruation (2001). By attributing lesbian sex to the suppression of heterosexual desires and the separation of the sexes in fundamentalist societies, the lesbian subject is projected to the public gaze as a heterosexually oppressed woman. All women in the novel are seen as willing to be engaged in “group sex” with each other, even when they have no feeling of love or commitment to one another. Batul, the woman who is defined as being “lesbian” is depicted as a bizarre sex worker who admits to making love on a daily basis to many women of all types; “married, single, traditional, liberal, and all of them very normal, and not necessarily unhappy with their lives” (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 101). Women’s obsession with sex is attributed to “the ideologically repressive nature of their societies” (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 154). The author’s assumption that lesbian sexuality
is imposed not chosen establishes lesbianism in the collective consciousness as an outcome of a conservative social structure that forbids women enough access to men.

However, since the so-called oppressed women of the novel manage to invite an inexperienced young man to have sex with, it becomes hard to understand the writer’s assumption that “the religious condemnation of non-marital sex” is the major cause of homosexuality in “the fundamentalist-conservative society” (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 149). When the narrator imposes a sense of guilt on homoerotic practices among women, the writer does not only stigmatize female same-sex relations; he also creates a prohibitive discourse that might make many lesbians internalize the imposed sense of guilt and shame. This kind of discourse constructs the lesbian in the collective public gaze as a mere example of “repression” in a conservative religious framework. According to Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), “social and psychic realities are connected in such a way that the social structure of discourse determines the character of interior psychic space” (as cited in Magnus, 2006, p. 84). In such a context, the lesbian subjectivity is reduced to a shameful and immoral effect of the subordinating social and political circumstances in a society in which “morality was little more than a tool of political oppression” (as cited in Magnus, 2006, p. 93).

In women’s writings about lesbian issues, the lesbian sexuality is similarly perceived as the outcome of the heterosexual oppression of women in traditional socio-political contexts. Despite the limitations and restrictions imposed on women’s writings about women, some women writers managed to provide an understanding of the ways in which society works to disadvantage women. However, none of these writings reveal enough sensitivity towards lesbian lovers. The discourse of female homosexuality was introduced to give an impression that “lesbianism is imposed on women” in a patriarchal society. Instead of providing positive lesbian images that can give authority to the multiple demands and needs of lesbians, lesbians were merely used by heterosexual women authors to legitimize the demands of heterosexual women.

Despite the fact that the novel by Saudi author Siba Al-Harz’s *The Others* (2006) appears to be written about lesbians, the writer does not identify herself as a lesbian author. Instead she regards the lesbian practice as imposed on the members of her sex due to sexual segregation in a religious society. Her use of a pseudonym to tell stories about female same-sex relations stigmatizes lesbianism. The novel deals with the struggle of a young Saudi woman in the context of a religious fundamentalist background. Having sado-masochistic relations with women, feeling disgusted with women, and breaking the hearts of many, including her own heart, are shown as representatives of her ways of breaking away from social values and traditions. Her first and only heterosexual relationship takes place with a Lebanese man she used to chat with on the Internet — her “virtual homeland” (Al-Harz, 2006, p. 226). Heterosexual love is portrayed as the most desired end; an end that matches the socio-sexual expectations of her sex. The protagonist confesses that despite the fact that she has homosexual relations, she refuses to define herself as “lesbian”. Her erotic relations with women are for her “an expression of a lustful desire for a man who will not come” (Al-Harz, 2006, p. 179). Hence, her longing to offer her virginity to a male lover (“Take it! I don’t want it! Take it!”) establishes lesbian sex as a socio-political need for protecting heterosexual women from losing their virginities (Al-Harz, 2006,
p. 285). Keen on abiding by the rules that pertain to preserving her chastity till the day of marriage, Al-Harz’s female protagonist underestimates her affairs with women as “meaningless”.

In some Arab women writings, the lesbian is subjected to a feminist compassionate gaze that seems to be provoked by the desire to reunite women through lesbian love. In Elham Mansour’s novel Ana Heya Anti (i.e. I Am You, 2000), Irigaray’s extended metaphor of the “two lips speaking together” as opposed to the singular, rigid, and phallic standard that characterizes masculinity is recalled in the title of the novel. In Irigaray’s words:

You/I: we are several at once..., [but] you/I become two, then, for their pleasure. But thus divided into two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me. Outside, you try to conform to an alien order. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. (as cited in Price, 1999, pp. 85-86)

In Mansour’s text, the lesbian body is portrayed as an exiled feminine body that pre-exists the separation between the “you” and the “I”. Lesbian love is seen as a narcissistic attempt to return to the first maternal body which is exemplified in the unique sensations that engulf Seham when she recalls the touches of her mother. As Ruth Vanita (1996) observes, this model of the mother-daughter relationship “anticipates Freud’s insight that the mother is the first love object for all babies implicitly, then, love for a woman is the primary experience of all women” (p. 12).

The feminine body language that is used by Irigaray in re-creating the mother-child dyad is repeated by Seham the lesbian protagonist. The bodily discourse of Seham is encountered by the psychological discourse of her teacher Layal who treats her lesbian student as a psychological case worthy of investigation. Seen in this light, the lesbian is subjected to the gaze of the teacher and the mother who find female same-sex attraction as “natural” among girls at a certain phase, “but that would become pathological if it persists” as the female teacher says to her student (Mansour, 2000, p. 28). Apparently, even when the act of looking takes place by a female author, lesbianism continues to be seen as a form of perversion or narcissism.

In Mansour’s novel, the sexual relation between women and the only self-declared lesbian character is treated as an encounter between vaginal bodies and a clitoral/phallic body. The problem with this discourse is that it can turn the lesbian body into “a pseudo male”, and a “phallic” body that replaces the male during times of sexual deprivation. Appearing as a “butch” makes the lesbian appear as a phallic body that is attractive to heterosexually deprived women. Many women in the novel regard the lesbian as a potential love-maker that replaces their absent men during the Lebanese civil war. The novel establishes lesbianism in the public fantasy as a safe haven for all women during the absence of men. Despite the fact that the lesbian butch affirms that femininity is not attached to an outfit, she continues to be seen as a phallic body that fulfills a heterosexual need for “fuck” (Mansour, 2000, p. 166). Adopting the Freudian psycho-analytical discourse, Mansour’s lesbian protagonist Seham is portrayed as “a true invert” who has never been attracted to men (Mansour, 2000, p. 75), but who is constantly subjected to a hetero-normalizing gaze and heterosexual expectations.
In most literary works written about lesbian issues, lesbian sexuality is perceived as a mere experience, and a sign of sexual oppression. In Samar Yazek’s *Raehatul Kirfa* (i.e. The Smell of Cinnamon, 2008), the author uses the Damascene culture as a means of asserting stereotypes, and repeating some pre-conceived ideas about female same-sex relations. In a sub-cultural context, the concept of *banat al ‘ishra* (or girls of co-habitation in Arabic) was most probably used in Damascus during the thirties to refer to upper middle class single females who refuse to marry men and live with other females in a strong and intimate connection. The concept of *banat al ‘ishra* exists in the collective memory of some old Damascenes as a euphemistic reference to “lesbians”; a neutral expression that is free of the heterosexual suggestions implied by the word “woman”. However, Yazbek uproots the potential “lesbian code” of *banat al ‘ishra* from its sub-cultural context and linguistic specificity and places it in a different era. According to Yazbek (2008),

the majority of ‘*banat al ‘ishra*’ are mainly married, and each one has a girlfriend or inamorata, and most of them get married early, and few people know about them, for their meetings are allocated to women only, and men feel assured when their wives are with other women, even if they feel that there is something suspicious in that friendship. The engagement remains acceptable if the woman’s affair remains secret. As soon as gossips begin, the husband breaks the affair between his wife and her girlfriend. (p. 97)

By turning single females who have loving relations exclusively with other females into wives who come from various social and sectarian backgrounds, the writer subverts the oral Damascene culture and incites a different official memory that totally excludes any possibility for a lesbian to identify herself as *bint al ‘ishra*. Yazbek’s women are united through their marital relations with influential men, not by mutual love or co-habitation, let alone the fact that Yazbek’s women are not *banat* (or girls) on the basis that they are married to men. Placing men at the center of lesbian sex, Yazbek’s discourse alienates lesbians from a distinguished local expression, and makes it difficult for lesbians to find refuge in the past. The unofficial voices of *banat al ‘ishra* are silenced by an official heterosexual discourse that turns them from independent females into dependent heterosexual women. Thus, by heterosexualizing the coined term of *banat al ‘ishra*, the lesbians of the past who might have had some roots in the oral culture are deprived of the vocabulary and the linguistic tool that could enable lesbians in the present to constitute themselves/ourselves as speaking subjects, without feeling totally estranged from language and culture.

In Hala El-Badry’s *A Certain Woman* (2003), lesbianism seems to be something unheard of by the women of the novel who deny it both physically and spiritually. One of her female characters compares a relationship with a woman to a relationship with an impotent man. By treating lesbianism as an impaired heterosexuality and a result of male impotence, desire is established as essentially heterosexual and penetrative. By the end of the novel, Nahid discovers for the first time that she never knew women or got close to any woman’s body. She “strongly resented gatherings of women only because they reminded her of mandatory segregation which she totally rejected” (El-Badry, 2003, p. 195). Women’s alienation from women’s bodies can be attributed to the fact that women’s private and public lives seem to be shaped by men’s laws and values. By referring to the
imposed policy of silence, isolation and segregation, El-Badry’s novel makes an adequate connection between the inhibition that surrounds women’s sexual lives and the inhibition that locks people’s tongues in the political domain. The social life of people is historically surrounded by fear of “informers and spies”, a fear that creates a sort of a deathly silence and divides people by feelings of hatred and suspicion (see Al-Ghafari Review, H-Gender-MidEast, 2006). Nevertheless, this tendency to politicize female solidarity and intimacy might turn the lesbian into a chosen feminist tool that can be invested by heterosexual women during the absence of potent men.

The emergence of the lesbian character in women’s literature is often weakened by discussions about the need to subordinate inter-cultural and sectarian differences for the sake of establishing a hegemonic national identity. In Kolette Al-Khoury’s Ayam ma’al Ayam (i.e. Days with the Days, 2004), the female author narrates her experience as a revolutionary journalist after “the ominous war of June 1967” (p. 23). In a post-war era, manhood, masculinity, and nationalism appear as arbitrary and inseparable terms, whereas lesbian sexuality is treated as alien to one’s national commitment to one’s country, and as “an unconscious reaction against the absence of real men” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). In this novel, the hetero-nationalized gaze is used as means of silencing lesbian voices. Lesbianism is treated as a phase that is similar to the political phase that “bent the heads of men” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207) after the Arab-Israeli War in June 1967 which is referred to as “nakset huzayran” in Syria, or “the June Setback” in Arab political contexts. It is related to the men’s loss of war and their failure in the political domain. This association turns lesbianism into an experience that is attributed to the non-existence of “true men” who can defend the land.

The application of a hetero-nationalistic discourse turns lesbianism into a phase that symbolizes the social and political disappointments of the era, and asserts the typical association between the masculinity of men in the political domain and their heterosexuality in the private sphere. The lesbian relation is described as a sign that symbolizes the defeat of men who “could not shoulder their responsibility” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). It is also exposed as a temporary experience that should not last. When Faten confesses to Suha that she had a love story of a different kind; an affair with a woman, Suha, who is the mouthpiece of the narrator, is shocked, exposing an unjustified homophobic reaction to the lesbian voice. When Suha was asked to provide her opinion regarding Faten’s affair with a woman, the narrator was incapable of providing any support. Rather, she felt inclined to “carry a lantern in the daylight to look for a man” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). This reaction silences Faten and forces her to promise not to repeat that experience: “I don’t think I’ll repeat it, though I can’t but say it had been a terrific experience... a frightening one” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 206). The narrator’s interpretation of the lesbian affair forces Faten to finally admit that her going out with a woman could have been an unconscious reaction to that feeling (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 207). In several instances in the novel, love is seen from a heterosexual light as “that natural relationship between a man and a woman” (Al-Khoury, 2004, p. 122). The assertion of the naturalness of heterosexual relations is repeated several times in a manner that denies the possibility of asserting other natural kinds of love and relationships in a positive manner.

In Hanan Al-Shaykh’s Misk Al-Ghazal (i.e. The Musk of the Gazelle, 1996), the traditional heterophobic gaze in gender segregated cultures is replaced by a homophobic gaze. Even
though the novel repeats the inherited idea which claims lesbianism to be an outcome of a conservative social structure in which opposite-sex relations are controlled, the narrator adopts an arbitrary homophobic ideology to defend her privileged Lebanese character against the “charge” of lesbianism. Though it is common for women in female-segregated communities to dance together, dancing women in this novel are exposed to the homophobic gaze of the Lebanese narrator who finds the sight of two women dancing together “weird” and “unnatural” (Al-Shaykh, 1996, p. 47). By making an association between the “lesbian bar” in Berlin which is referred to as “the bar of deviant women in Berlin” (Al-Shaykh, 1996, p. 62) and all-women’s parties in the Saudi culture, the Lebanese character unites a Western sub-culture with an Eastern sub-culture by a globalized homophobic gaze that seems rather awkward when applied to a closeted culture that tolerates women dancing together more than men and women doing the same. Her moral judgment of the dancing women, which imposes a series of expectations and meanings on women’s gatherings, is detached from the various emotions of the women themselves and the meaning of their dance in their local cultures. When all scenes of women dancing together are described by the gaze of the narrator as “deviant”, female intimacies in general and lesbian ones in particular are projected to a wider homophobic gaze as equally deviant. Eventually, in equating lesbianism with deviance, the narrator inserts a regulating discourse that forces lesbians to internalize the stigma and see themselves through the eyes of their disgusted beholder.

In Salwa Al-Nuaimi’s Burhan al-’Asal (i.e. Evidence of Honey, 2007), lesbianism is seen by one of the female characters as “an experiment [that each woman] must go through, at least once in a lifetime, just for the sake of exploration” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 85). This experimental discourse is rejected by Nuaimi’s protagonist who describes herself as innately heterosexual. She could not return the flirtations of the woman who kept on pursuing her for years, as much as she could not enjoy being rubbed by a woman, because her mind was filled with heterosexual reflections that could not be gratified by a female rubber. The experience of being rubbed at the hands of a woman does not give vent to a heterosexual woman’s fantasies. According to the heterosexual protagonist, “[h]ad the masseuse been a man massaging her, [her hetero-erotic fantasies] would have made her blood boil” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 86). Aware of the historical meanings associated with the act of rubbing, the female protagonist acknowledges that she is not “lesbian by instinct” (Al-Nuaimi 2007, p. 86), and the fact that she was rubbed by a woman for thirty minutes might make her “suhaqeyya” for thirty minutes” (Al-Nuaimi, 2007, p. 86).

In Al-Nuaimi’s text, the physical act of a woman “rubbing” another woman is deconstructed as not necessarily lesbian because its meaning differs according to the woman’s inner desires and fantasies towards the sex of the one who performs the act of rubbing. The author suggests that if the rubbing act is performed by a male masseur in the bath, she would enjoy it in a heterosexual manner. In this context, the self-assertive heterosexual narrator reveals a subtle fear of the potential presence of a desiring lesbian gaze that might frame her as lesbian, because she is being rubbed by a masseuse. Therefore, she asserts that she is not lesbian, because she desires men and she prefers to be rubbed by a man. By diverting the attention from the physical act of rubbing to the implicit desire of the woman who is being rubbed and her feelings towards the sex of the rubber, the author deconstructs the traditional gaze that judges desire on the basis of the performed acts. By doing that, she also reveals a conscious awareness of the potential
presence of a lesbian gaze that might be incorporated within the sensations of the masseuse herself to whom she remains sexually detached. Her focus on the unseen desire reduces the significance of the visible act of rubbing and the temporary experience. It also subdues the power of the gaze as an identity-maker. However, her fear of the act of being rubbed by a masseuse that might frame her as “lesbian” makes her adopt a self-defensive heterosexual discourse that exposes the innateness of heterosexuality for a heterosexual woman and the necessity of categorizing the heterosexual desire as an emotional, mental and erotic love for men. This essentialized heterosexual discourse shows the need for a counter self-affirmative lesbian discourse that asserts the innateness of the lesbian desire for many lesbians and the necessity of transcending the rubbing act as a means of defining subjectivities.

In *Bareed Mista3jil* (i.e. Urgent Mail, 2009) which is supposed to be “a collection of true stories by non-heterosexual women living in Lebanon”, one of the anonymous lesbian speakers rejects the act of “sou7aq” as a means of self-expression. Though she names herself “sou7aqqiyyah”, she expresses her confusion at the contradictory connotations of the Arabic label “sou7aq” that is “supposed to denote sexual acts between two women in the form of ‘grinding/rubbing… [when]… the verb also means to crush” (Sou7aqqiyyeh, 2009, p. 35). Hence, she mockingly inquires: “How in the world is the verb ‘to crush’ supposed to signify anything related to a woman loving or making love to another woman?” (Sou7aqqiyyeh, 2009, pp. 35-36). Seen as an improper means of identity formation, the physical act of “rubbing/grinding” that had been historicized as a lesbian one is rejected. The speaker in *Sou7aqqiyyeh* rejects both the Arabic label and its multiple associations with the acts of “grinding”, “rubbing”, and “crushing”. Instead of de-stigmatizing the label, the speaker exiles herself from language. The fact that the text is written in English can be seen as an attempt to come out of the closets of Arabic language and culture. Refusing to see herself through the eyes of her beholders, the modern lesbian speaker rejects the Arabic label as a socio-political means of visibility. Instead of liberating the Arabic label from the confining power of the gaze, the Arabic label is re-asserted as an offensive marker of self-definition, disregarding the fact that any other label can be similarly stigmatized or abused by the hegemonic discourse of meaning-makers in any other culture or language.

Although the newly emerging lesbian voices in *Bareed Mista3jil* exemplify a break from the past, the fact that the “queer” speakers appear as nameless voices coming out of nowhere makes it difficult to find a way to re-invent language, to re-name desire, and to name the nameless subjectivity. Such a disguised “coming out” might make lesbians internalize the globalized homophobia; it might also lead to reinforcement of the politics of invisibility as a cultural norm and political necessity. *Bareed Mista3jil* can be read as a collective plea for understanding the feelings and dilemmas of many modern lesbians. However, this collectively anonymous discourse embodies a new split between the lesbian body and the voice. Even while obtaining the power of articulation, the lesbian body as a physical presence remains powerless. Despite the fact that this text can be seen as an attempt to “kill” the Arab author in order to enable lesbian voices to exist, it cannot be seen as a lesbian text because its authors are anonymous. According to Roland Barthes (1967), “once the author is discovered, the text is ‘explained’” (p. 5). Because the lesbian author is not discovered as a living person, the lesbian text remains unexplained. By preventing the lesbian authors
from appearing as real and tangible beings, *Bareed Mista3jil* did not only kill its own authors; it also buried the lesbian voices in an apparently virtual space.

Clearly, most of the Arabic narratives establish lesbian desire as a “taboo pleasure” and “forbidden sin” that is akin to prostitution. Despite the fact that lesbian sexuality is rarely mentioned in religious books or considered to be a sin, there is a tendency among modern male writers to establish it as being a “sinful practice” that is pursued by sexually frustrated wives and suppressed heterosexual women. Lesbian images in female-authored texts are as negative and disempowering as they are in male-authored texts. In women’s writings about lesbians, one encounters sexually obsessed figures, erotic bodies, cruel creatures, oppressed wives, psychologically disturbed women, or angry freaks. Such representations of lesbians in women’s texts are not meant to give voice to a lesbian subjectivity, as much as they seem to be directed towards doubling the stigma or incorporating it in a so-called “feminist cause” which mainly revolves around the presumed needs/desires of heterosexual women. Hence, the lesbian is not only the desired other to male writers; she is also the desired and abused other to many women writers.

In examining several available discourses about lesbian relations, I became aware that Arabic literature plays a major role in structuring the dominant system of values in a manner that would make readers in general and lesbian ones in particular internalize the cultural implications contained in language. Contemporary Arabic literature about lesbian issues does not contain any interrogation of womanhood as a cultural or political construct, but uses the “woman” as a means of referring to any lesbian subjectivity, leaving no chance for lesbians to assert their own differences from other women and among themselves/ourselves. Rather, the image of the lesbian is distorted, heterosexualized, and politicized by several Arab writers to promote what they see as a need for liberating women. The dominant discourse in contemporary Arabic literature gives an impression that once heterosexual freedom is given to women, “homosexuality” will fade away. The logic of a lesbian selfhood as being innately different from womanhood does not exist in the collective symbolic order. Hence, the lesbian “I” cannot assert her unique subjectivity or become a speaking self without confronting the constraining discourse and the heterosexual gaze that treats her as a “woman”, with all the heterosexual implications associated with womanhood. As Monique Wittig argues, “Lesbian is the only concept that I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically or ideologically” (as cited in Shaktini, 2005, p. 69).

Because the imagined homosexual practices in Arab cultures have historically been subsumed within a seemingly tolerant homosocial order that does not defy the heterosexual institution of marriage, lesbianism came to be defined in accordance with the fantasized acts in the heterosexual and homosocial closets. Apparently, contemporary Arabic literature does not make enough distinction between outing the fantasized homosexual acts to the public gaze and outing the single lesbian subjectivity as an authentic core that seeks recognition on the one hand, and as an unacknowledged selfhood that transcends both the heterosexual gaze and all its closets on the other hand. Henceforth, Joseph Massad’s (2007) anti-Western discourse in *Desiring Arabs* which equates between “outing the closet” and the “colonial
propaganda” of “the Gay International” (pp. 375–376) creates a paradoxical situation for the voiceless subjectivities. Massad’s denial of the need for identity politics in Arab contexts might lead to hetero-normalizing the subdued lesbian subjectivity as relational, provisional, meaningless, anti-Arab, and Westernized, before she even aspires to become a speaking subject.

Clearly, contemporary Arabic literature does not distinguish between “compulsory homosexuality” and lesbian subjectivities. Rather, it presents female same-sex relations in an illusive and non-sympathetic manner that over-stigmatizes lesbian self-assertion. Many male and female writers treat the female body as a dependent heterosexual construct that shares a common desire and that has no independent will or autonomy. Such an oppressive image sustains the stereotypical female sense of inferiority and helplessness. Men’s writings about “women” and women’s writings about “other females” play a role in combining the existing heterophobic gaze that surrounds opposite sex relations with a new homophobic one surrounding same-sex relations. While most Arab women’s writings on lesbian issues offer no liberating perceptions of lesbianism, they show the need to add a new gender-sensitive dimension to women’s studies and Arab feminism. Consequently, what is needed is the autobiographical form of lesbian storytelling by self-declared lesbians. Autobiography is indeed “the final guarantee that what we read is true account” (Morris, 1993, p. 64).

Thus, asserting the autonomous lesbian subjectivity as a speaking subject requires surpassing the domineering heterosexual gaze which is accompanied in certain instances with a nationalistic gaze that invents and re-invents lesbians in accordance with heterosexual norms of sex, romance, womanhood, and nationhood. In order to give voice to a more concrete and empowering concept of the lesbian subjectivity, lesbians need to be liberated from the repetitive scripts written about them/us and the opportunistic politics of gender segregation that might risk locking the peculiar self in a feminist harem in which lesbians are neither given the right to “be different” nor “be equal”. Obviously, asserting the lesbian “I” is an exhausting lifelong process because it entails confronting all systems: historical, social, sexual, religious, linguistic, and political.

Clearly, the independent lesbian subjectivity that constantly defies the heterosexual gaze and surpasses its expectations remains absent from the hegemonic gaze of the Arabic narrative that disciplines, abuses, misinterprets, or manipulates the female body. Consequently, “the lesbian body... as a spiritual body that exists prior to the material practice of sex, as a sensual body that speaks a different body language, as a mental body that has its own ethics, and as a virgin autonomous body” (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 165) is not perceived by the dominant ways of looking. Hence, the “lesbian as an infinite sensual, mental, spiritual, and sexual awareness that is incarnated in a female body” is still unintelligible to the hegemonic hetero-normalizing gaze (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 145). The lesbian subjectivity as a genuine and intuitive core that pre-exists experience, intentionality, and the spoken word, and as “a tenacious lesbian soul that steadily defends its lesbian specificity throughout her entire life” (Al-Ghafari, 2013, p. 145) does not seem to be recognized by most Arab authors. Using Butler’s (1990) “epistemological paradigm” that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’” (p. 142), it becomes obvious that the lesbian subjectivity does not seem to have a recognizable position in Arabic literature, because there is a decisive intention to regard lesbianism as an accidental deed without an
intentional doer, or reduce it to a meaningless act of an oppressed doer. The issue at stake is how can a self-defined lesbian assert one’s subjectivity, when both the “deed” and the “doer” are entangled within the limiting heterosexual codes of intelligibility?

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Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?

Nadine Moawad and Tamara Qiblawi

On 15 June 2010, the Lebanese online community heaved a collective sigh of relief as the Lebanese Parliament voted to indefinitely postpone discussions on a newly proposed e-transactions law. “The ESSA (Electronic Signatures and Services Authority) [would be] established under this law with discretionary, selective, subjective and very broad and unjustified powers”, said Gabriel Deek, secretary general of the Professional Computer Association of Lebanon, adding that “its prerogatives are almost repressive for all ‘service providers’ of electronic services and economic sectors at large” (Deek, 2010). The draft law, which purports to protect e-commerce from fraudulent activities, would actually lead to law enforcement without judicial oversight.

Though Lebanon has long enjoyed an Internet in which law enforcement authorities do not intervene — a situation that stands in sharp contrast to that of its neighboring countries — many in the online community expected this day to come. “The Lebanese government is writing yet another chapter in the endless mockery of our rights as private citizens and social entrepreneurial agents of progress and change,” said Imad Atallah of the Lebanese daily, The Daily Star. He added that “the state is extending censorship […] into the last frontier of freedom — the Internet and its supposed neutrality” (Atallah, 2010).

An investigative probe into the vulnerable relationship between Lebanese citizens and the Internet uncovers a series of lawsuits, acts of censorship, and police threats. Additionally, slow and expensive Internet connections, which had long been a source of jokes and mockery by the online community, gradually turned into a source of anger and rebellion. By early 2011, a number of pressure groups had formed out of the bloggers, techies, and Twitter communities, in addition to the private sector, to create lobbying and awareness campaigns calling for a faster, freer, and more affordable Internet. The most active of these has been the “Ontornet” campaign which played on the slang Lebanese word “ontor” meaning “wait” to mock the slow Lebanese Internet connections.

Twenty-something years after the end of Lebanon’s Civil War, it appears that civil society in Lebanon is beginning to make important inroads in advancing progressive social and economic issues in public and policy-making arenas alike. The number of grassroots organizations that focus on individual and group rights has mushroomed, and for probably the first time in the country’s history, the Interior Ministry (up until June 2011) was headed by a politician who has emerged from civil society rather than from one of Lebanon’s many dynastic political families. Of this diverse and active civil
society, one particular community that has enjoyed a long and complex relationship with the Internet is the Lebanese queer rights movement, which has become a dynamic, cohesive component of Lebanon’s civil society. It is likely that there is no other movement in Lebanon that has benefited more from information and communications technologies (ICTs) for its growth and for the sophistication of its strategies.

This research article aims to examine the dynamics of the queer movement as they relate to ICTs. In particular, it will trace the intricate ways in which queers in Lebanon have used various ICT tools to create, build, and expand their liberation movement. The research focuses on women within the queer movement, because queer-ICT dynamics are especially pronounced in this area, and is carried out in the context of the movement’s national and regional environments. Historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors will be considered in order to provide us with a clear understanding of the relatively recent phenomena that we study. In parallel, we will also examine the ICT environment and its development in relation to technology, politics, and human rights. At a time when policy-makers are beginning to raise the prospect of the Internet as a space where Lebanon’s many social, economic, and legal “unfreedoms” will soon be implemented, such a study is timely. It is more important now than ever to understand the extent to which queer freedoms are intertwined with the Internet so that queers may use this knowledge to tackle those prospective conditions.

In January 2010, a web-based Arab LGBT magazine Bekhsoos.com published a series of articles celebrating a decade of LGBT activism in Lebanon. “It’s actually been over a decade,” wrote the magazine’s Arabic editor who writes under the pseudonym Aphrodite. As she added, “we consider the registration of GayLebanon.com in 1998 as a marker of the start of an organized movement. But we wanted to celebrate the past decade in which most of the crucial developments occurred”. Most of the articles in the commemorative issue featured a Top 10 listing of different queer categories: the most prominent hang-out places, the best LGBT publications, music videos, films, etc. Among these was one that listed the top seven online tools that played a major role in the LGBT movement and community-building. This ranged from “ONElist that later became eGroups that later became Yahoo! Groups that then branched off into other mailing lists” and then Twitter (Shant, 2010). In many ways the development of queer use of software tells the history of its growth. At both personal and political levels, the Internet facilitated the interactions of queer women and helped the movement get recognition with dignity since the late 1990s.

This study exposes the ways in which the LGBT community made use of Internet technologies to build a powerful and tech-savvy movement for social justice, while highlighting formative interplays that occurred between the Lebanese queer women’s movement and both the national and international queer movement in this virtual arena. It highlights the queer women’s movement in Lebanon and its interactions with ICTs in particular. Queer uses of ICTs in Lebanon represent a number of turning points in the development of the queer women’s movement, and allow us to paint a comprehensive picture of the subject at hand. This research project is primarily feminist and auto-ethnographic and depends on a number of methods and conceptual frameworks.

2. See section on “Conceptual frameworks” for an elaboration on “queer”.
Introductions and Crowd-sourcing
The study depends primarily on first-hand accounts of Lebanese queer activists since 1997. Sixteen interviewees discussed personal experiences on the Internet with regards to queer issues and helped to flesh out intersections between personal identification, personal growth, and the Internet. Interviewees also traced the development of the Lebanese queer movement, from the creation of local spaces on the Internet to the emergence of NGOs and support groups in the Lebanese public arena. Throughout the course of our analysis, we have tried to incorporate the diverse experiences of our interviewees into our findings while also identifying a common trajectory for the personal and political development of the movement. In order to understand the ICT environment with which the queer movement has developed, we have scanned the online community cross-sectionally. We did this through the crowd-sourcing method. The basic idea of crowd-sourcing is to broadcast a question about a problem and to study the responses. For this research, we published a blurb on one of the researchers’ blog about our research question and spread the word about it, mainly using the micro-blogging networking platform Twitter (Moawad, 2010). We asked for tips, contacts, opinions, and links to websites that would help. This method proved fruitful because it required an active engagement with the online community that responded to our call with tweets, comments, and e-mails, subsequently enriching our observations of the ICT environment.

A Regional Context
During our preliminary research, we noted some important interactions between Lebanon and its regional environment that helped to explain some central features of the queer women-ICT relationship. We noted that in several instances, other countries have sought to alter Lebanon’s censorship and surveillance policies in order to manipulate certain national political dynamics. This reinforces the notion that the state of ICTs in a country, and particularly the censorship laws that are applied on them, cannot be understood without an understanding of a country’s geopolitics. We therefore also studied the ICT-queer relationship in the context of an extra-national environment. Due to time and space restrictions we’ve placed the frame of our research around a certain region that we identify as more immediate than others. This region consists of countries with which Lebanon shares a border: Syria and Palestine. Also included are Jordan, the Gulf Countries, and Egypt. We also believe that a comparison of the state of technologies in Lebanon and other countries in this region will help to reveal important information about the state of ICTs in Lebanon.

It is also crucial to note that the significant and historic regional revolutions since December 2010, reassessed the role of ICTs and social media as political tools for change. While very little material (and indeed, very little faith in social media) could be found before this time, a plethora of articles and studies have since emerged about the Internet and social change in the Arab world.

Research Target Groups: Meem and Meem-Facilitated Spaces
Meem, which literally means the Arabic letter “m”, is an organization founded in August 2007 with the vision of offering better quality lives for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and transgender persons in Lebanon. Since its inception, Meem’s activist philosophy revolved around creating safe spaces (online and offline)
for individuals who shared a common oppression, mainly one where gender and sexuality intersect. While Meem started out as a lesbian group focusing on women having same-sex relationships, its collective understanding of sexuality and gender developed over the years to focus more on queer identities and feminism. These changes, viewed as significant and defining by members of the group, were a result of countless conversations around individual experiences and identities, in addition to workshops, trainings, and writings, both local and international.

Meem membership rules include strict guarding of the privacy of individuals, activities, and spaces as evident in the following excerpts from the rules available online for individuals who are considering joining the group:

> Everything we do is confidential, and we trust you to maintain the privacy of Meem and all its members if you join the group. We are very strict about this. Meem is not a lesbian or trans zoo. We do not exist to provide you with a display of women of different sexualities or persons of a variety of genders for your university project or TV program or sexual fantasies [...] Meem does NOT out people. We guard the privacy of our members in every way we can. You are forbidden to repeat the names or any private information of the members outside of the group, even to your friends.

We particularly chose to focus our sample of interviewees on Meem members and activists because of the group’s ongoing sophisticated ways of interacting and negotiating through technology for their strategies. Issues of anonymity, pseudonymity, community-building, and self-expression were recurrent themes in the interviews. Meem’s large membership (over 400 members in 2001) represented the broadest sampling of the lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, and transgender communities in Lebanon.

It is also important to note that the group is generally “unfriendly” towards researchers who are not personally invested and engaged with the issues. Meem coordinators receive many email requests every month from researchers and journalists for interviews. Their security measures led the members to tighten the conditions on interviews they are willing to give. Therefore, only by involving a good number of researchers and interviewers from within Meem (and the membership as a whole) in the discussions and consultations were the interviewers able to reach the targeted sample from within the community for the purpose of this study.

Meem’s priorities did not include “coming out” or raising public visibility of queer women and transgenders. Instead, it focused on personal empowerment and building a network of support. In an interview with Lynn, who served as a group co-coordinator from 2009 to 2011, she says: “[Meem’s] philosophy of support is to sustain the building of a healthy community of queer women and transgendered persons whose bonds are strengthened by values of trust, respect, and positive energy. Support may come in many forms and is usually comprehensive: from peer-to-peer support to psychological, medical, and legal support; from a heart-to-heart conversation over a cup of coffee on the house’s balcony, a counseling session with one of Meem’s counselors, to a small
financial contribution for temporary housing and transportation, for example" (personal communication with Lynn).

In order to understand the experiences of queer women in Lebanon, this study specifically targeted individuals active in Meem’s work. Over the course of the conversations, the concept of “spaces” emerged as a key understanding that required fleshing out. The “looseness” of defined locations of members’ diverse activism led us to identify a number of “Meem-facilitated spaces” which were crucial to examining the progression of the movement. “Meem-facilitated spaces” consist of any space, both virtual and physical, that Meem members use in order to foster communication and to conduct Meem-related activities. These include Meem’s support headquarters—“The House”, its online publication Bekhsoos, its Twitter page, some Facebook fan pages, some websites, spaces within other organizations (online and offline), spaces “infiltrated” by members, and temporary spaces that Meem borrows in order to coordinate activities.

The significance of looking at Meem-facilitated spaces rather than Meem as a traditional organization is that it allows for a more in-depth look at the diverse community (and its diverse issues) that is represented in Meem. It also promotes a movement-oriented lens, rather than one that focuses on a particular organization and its controlled environment.

Meem enjoys a membership of over 400 women who receive nearly daily e-mails with information about upcoming events as well as about logistical, strategic developments at Meem’s offices. Our findings are based primarily on interviews with 14 members/users of Meem spaces on the Internet who provided us with an understanding of how they used ICTs. The same set of questions was discussed with every interviewee, coupled with an open-ended discussion of the Internet’s effects on their personal and activist lives. Since many Meem-facilitated spaces, notably Twitter and Bekhsoos.com, involve many non-Meem members, we also interviewed several non-queers (6 in total) who offered important insight about their use of ICT. This also enabled us to look at Meem’s ICT usage within the broader framework of Lebanese civil rights activism and the Arab online community. In addition to these two groups, we also interviewed 4 male LGBT activists in order to understand the historic dimension of queer organizing and ICT usage and also to provide a gender contrast to the findings based on the women’s interviews.

All interviewees in this research article are referred to by their chosen online nicknames unless explicit permission was given to use their full names.

Positioning of Researchers
The research team consisted almost entirely (with one exception) of researchers who have been active participants in the queer movement in Lebanon over a number of years. The team had 2 writers and 7 interviewers, a number of whom were also interviewed and asked the same set of questions. This positioning of researchers as “insiders” resulted in a number of advantages such as in-depth knowledge of the subject, ease of gaining trust from the community, and access to individuals who are otherwise difficult to identify and interview. It raises, however, some issues around the politics of positioning. Smith (1999) notes that:
Insider research needs to be ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical as outsider research. It also needs to be humble... because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position.... One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories. (Smith, 1999, p. 139)

Therefore, the research process was coupled with critical reflection on the potential biases of the researchers, in addition to engaging other members of Meem — interviewees included in the analysis and direction of the research findings.

The Internet in the Arab World
In this section, we examine the evolution of the Internet environment in Lebanon while situating it within the larger Arab environment. Challenges to online freedom, especially when it comes to discussing sexuality, can be divided along two main axes: legal censorship, which is heavily influenced by culture and public morality, and infrastructural censorship which includes filtering, high costs, and slow Internet.

The Rise of Internet Usage
Most of our research was conducted in the pre-revolutionary period of the Arab world. Public opinion about the Internet and its significant role changed drastically after the historic revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the ongoing protests happening at the time of writing this paper in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. Discourse around Facebook and Twitter usage went from discussing “slacktivism” to recognizing the catalyst role of social media in overthrowing dictatorships and enabling freedom of expression in online and offline spheres.

A report launched by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) in February 2011 stated:

The Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected to attract 100 million Arab users by 2015. These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable. To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history. (CIMA, 2010)

There are over 65 million Internet users in the Arab region today, as a result of a recent boom in Internet usage in the region. Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia have seen the highest increase in Internet usage with the UAE showing the highest Internet penetration rate at 60 percent. Egypt has the highest number of Internet users in the region. However, mobile phones remain the most popular and most accessible means of communication. While there is an increase in Internet usage, access to information...
and expression on the Internet remains restrained due to low and expensive bandwidth and Internet connections. Language is also a difficult issue since the Internet is not very Arabic-friendly. However, this is slowly changing, for companies like Google started to customize special programs for their Arab users. These include “Ahlan, Online” (www.google.com/intl/ar/ahlanonline) to help first time users navigate the net. Also, recent technological developments allowed Egypt to launch the world’s first Arabic language domain name URL. Internet in Lebanon has an access rate of 31 percent whereas that of the mobile market is 68 percent, according to a study by the TRA conducted in December 2010.

Legal Restrictions on the Internet in Lebanon

Freedoms in Arab countries are hampered by the authoritarian systems that govern them. Global Voices lists five Arab countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia) on its Top 10 list of countries where most bloggers are arrested, imprisoned, or tortured. In total, 93 out of the 234 tracked cases, a staggering 40 percent, are Arab. Lebanon has long enjoyed relative freedom of expression, of association, and of speech, although this record is mixed owing to Lebanon’s infrastructural deficiency and frequent absence of the rule of law. Sami Moubayed, a Syrian political analyst and journalist, writes for GulfNews.com:

> It is no wonder that Lebanon ranks first when it comes to Internet freedoms in the Arab World. There is no censorship, and active Lebanese can go to great lengths to market their views on politics and life on the World Wide Web. The fact that most Lebanese are young — and are fluent with languages — makes Internet use all the more easier. So does Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution, which guarantees “freedom of expression, verbally or in writing, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, and freedom to form associations”. Internet cafes are everywhere to be found, and there are no age or ID requirements to log-on to the Internet. Unlike other countries in the region, neither political sites, nor pornographic ones — not even Israeli propaganda — are proxied. The only exceptions are schools and universities, or in some workplaces, where certain sites are restricted to ensure a more productive environment. (Moubayed, 2008)

While the constitution of Lebanon describes Lebanon as a secular republic, religious institutions still wield a great deal of influence over several facets of political and social life. Personal and family status issues fall under the jurisdiction of religious courts while the public sphere is ruled by state institutions. Religious institutions, however, weigh in very heavily on a variety of issues, chief among them is media content.

Censorship Through Defamation Accusations: The Case of Gaylebanon.com

While a number of cases have been made public in recent times concerning the Internet and freedom of speech, the first serious case dates back 10 years and involves the first Lebanese LGBT website: gaylebanon.com. The domain name was registered on September 29, 1999 and is considered to be one of the manifestations of the beginning of an organized LGBT movement. Gay and lesbian activists and individuals who were unable to come out publicly were able to use the website to find information, resources, links


to chat rooms and mailing lists, and a connection to a larger community. On April 3, 2000, a vice squad conducted a raid on the offices of Destination, the Beirut Internet Service Providers (ISP) wrongly associated with the website. Ziad Mughraby, owner of Destination, was interrogated and pressured to reveal the names of people responsible for gaylebanon.com but he did not have the information that the Hobeish Police Station, Beirut’s morality station infamous for its violations of the human rights of detainees, wanted. A human rights organization led by Kamal Batal, MIRSAD (Multi-Initiative on Rights: Search, Assist and Defend) took up the case and issued a press release that highlighted “the unlawful attempts by the police to interfere in the freedom of the Internet and the freedom of expression of the gay community” (Singh-Barlett, 2000). Both Batal and Mughraby (who are civilians) were then transferred to a military court and charged with “tarnishing the reputation of the vice squad by distributing a printed flyer”. They were eventually released with fines of 219 USD each.

This gaylebanon.com incident is the only known Lebanese website case to result in prosecution and a court case, albeit arbitrarily against the only two people the police could find, however remotely, connected to the owners. The website, registered in the USA, survived as a portal of knowledge and paved the way for many other websites that came after it. On March 17, 2010, Khodor Salameh (who blogs at http://jou3an.wordpress.com) became the first Lebanese blogger to be threatened by officials for criticizing Lebanese President Michel Sleiman. The Lebanese security forces asked him to change his tone, close his blog, or stick to writing poetry. He was also threatened with a defamation lawsuit.¹³

Data Retention and Monitoring
All Lebanese ISPs, of which there are 17 licensed in Lebanon, are required by Telecom Law no. 431 to maintain logs of all sites visited by their users for at least two years. These logs can be made available to the Internal Security Forces or General Security for criminal investigations. Encrypted connections to password-protected accounts, however, prevent ISPs from tracking personal e-mails and chat logs. One Lebanese Internet expert and hacker who identifies himself as LoCo says: “[ISPs] can keep logs, yes, but when I was talking to some people inside ISPs they said they don’t keep much of the logs. They probably keep only the connections you open, but not the details”.

Internet Access and Filtering
In 2009, the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) carried out technical tests in Lebanon using several ISPs and different connections and found no evidence of the use of technical filtering to limit access to Web content.¹⁴ To date, public or religious concern with the open access to Internet pornography or sexuality-related material has not been voiced, despite common vocal interference in traditional offline portrayals of erotic material. The production or dissemination of pornography in Lebanon is prohibited under Article 533 of the Lebanese Penal Code.¹⁵ Pornography is defined as harmful material that violates “public decency” (“public decency” is interpreted as both that formulated in laws and in what the general public attitudes dictate, influenced by religion and tradition naturally).

The ONI research that looked at Internet filtering in the Middle East and North Africa determined that “Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank do not currently filter
any material ... But even though the state in Lebanon does not practice surveillance, many private spaces do. Some Internet café operators in Lebanon have admitted to using surveillance software to monitor the browsing habits of clients under the pretext of protecting security or preventing them from accessing pornography” (York, 2009). Similarly, on all university campuses in Lebanon, wireless Internet connections are censored using different techniques from keyword filtering to site blockage to bandwidth limitations. At the American University of Beirut, a number of websites are filtered by keywords such as “lesbian” or “porn”. However, the university links students to a request form should they wish to report the website as safe and remove it from filtering.

In September 2009, an Islamic search engine, ImHalal.com was launched with pre-filtered search that allowed Muslims to avoid surfing across any website that wasn’t halal (i.e. permissible within Islam). When the CEO of ImHalal.com was asked about the motivation behind creating the search engine, he noted:

> We had picked up that many Muslims avoided the Internet because they were afraid that they or their children would bump into explicit content, which is a shame because it’s important that everyone is able to collect information and get him or herself informed about certain subjects ... we don’t believe that the Google safe search is returning “clean” and safe enough results. (Al-Saleh, 2009)

The launch of ImHalal.com could signal the beginning of a movement towards restricting the Internet based on cultural traditions and practices. Bekhsoos.com reported on the new website noting that:

> “Nipple” will get you a haram (i.e. sinful) level 1 out of 3, while “breast” gets you 2 out of 3. When I first checked the site in August, “lesbian” would get you a 3 out of 3 haram level (in red!) but now it’s been reduced to level two, the fastest ijtihad (i.e. process of re-interpreting the Qur’an) I’ve ever seen. (Nadz, 2009)

**The Sexual Rights Movement**

In parallel to the development of the Internet over the past decade, both in terms of increased access and technological sophistication, the queer movement in Lebanon also developed its usage of the Internet for personal and political gains. The relative freedom of posting and accessing content online has undoubtedly facilitated and empowered Lebanese queers and offered them a virtual space to further their quest for justice. In sharp contrast to neighboring countries in the Arab region, Lebanon has a vibrant and developed queer movement that has been active for over a decade. In countries like Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, small LGBT communities have emerged in recent years but are still in the nascent stages in terms of organizing on the ground and online presence.

The following section enumerates the ways in which the queer women’s movement in Lebanon has operated within the developing ICT environment. It aims to gauge the effects that ICT has had on the size, voice, and shape of the movement and the nuanced ways in which this played out.
Homophobia Entrenched in the Legal System

Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalizes “sexual acts against nature” with up to a year in prison. A leftover law from the French mandate, Article 534 has been a pivotal point of advocacy for the LGBT movement, which calls for its annulment. Helem,\(^\text{16}\) the national LGBT organization, provides legal services for individuals charged based on Article 534 and continues to highlight its detrimental effects on the LGBT community. In addition to the above article, a myriad of other laws affect the LGBT community including laws against “offending public morals” and “promoting lewdness”.

Although Article 534 is widely known as an anti-sodomy law and targets men more than women, women still face acute and different forms of homophobia, both as a direct result of homophobic and misogynist legislation and because of public perceptions of women’s bodies and sexuality.

A Quick History of Lebanese Queers and the Internet

Personal and Political levels

As early as the Internet got to Lebanon in the early 1990s, gay and lesbian individuals used search engines to find other people like themselves. Many undertook this research thinking they were going to find other individuals internationally and not in Lebanon. The first dating and matchmaking websites for homosexuals were in English and hosted in the United States or Western Europe, and many Lebanese LGBTs found themselves on these websites connecting with English- or French-speaking LGBTs with the very odd chance of finding an Arab or Lebanese gay person online. Internet chat sites contributed to the rapid formation of gay self-identities, with a growing number of people actively seeking out others like them to date, befriend, and talk to. One user who goes by the nickname “eagle” explains her first interaction:

I remember googling... wait, no we didn’t have Google at the time. I remember searching for homosexuality on Yahoo as soon as I had Internet access at home. It was in the late 90s. I found a bunch of links, a lot of them were about AIDS, and most of them were American. Although it felt good to find positive information about homosexuality, it still felt alien to me. One night I was chatting on FreeTel, the popular chat client at the time and I found a nickname that was “lesbian4lesbian” and rushed to chat with it. She (actually I’m not sure if it was a she) was from London and freaked me out when she started talking explicitly about sex. I was too shy to continue the conversation. But I do remember that she was the first person to teach me that :) was a tilted smiling face.

A similar experience is described in the story “My Quest to Find Lesbians” in *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009):

The first word I ever searched for on Yahoo! was “homosexual”. It was the first day my dad got me a dial-up Internet connection for my birthday. It was October 1998 and Internet back then cost a fortune. I remember it was something like $6 an hour, so I had to be very quick and I got right down to the point. I had to find some lesbians! (p. 107)
The online tools of communication that the LGBT community predominantly took advantage of in the early days of the movement were chat rooms (on mIRC or Yahoo! or websites). Many, however, reported feeling frustrated that online spaces were predominantly Western. So they were spurred to create a local forum using mIRC. The chat channel #gaylebanon was created by a group of ten queer Lebanese: “It was much easier with a local chat room for individuals to discuss local matters and meet each other. With global spaces, it was much harder to find one another”, said TouchE, one of the founders of #gaylebanon, “It was also hard for us, Lebanese, to relate with other queers who lived abroad, who had their very own rights and freedoms”. While the queer virtual network in Lebanon flourished, Lebanon’s queers slowly began to emerge from the underground into the streets of Beirut. Queers converged in Acid, a nightclub that sits among a cluster of industrial warehouses in the capital’s outskirts. “The few times that, when I was 16-17, I went to Acid, it was like, you know how you go to have one night stands and you don’t mention your name or anything or where you come from and you just dance with a person”, says Shant, a queer activist and member of Meem, “and then at the end of the night you just go home as if nothing happened”.

In parallel to the chat room, a small group of individuals also ran a ONEList (which later became Yahoo! Groups) mailing list. Membership on the list reached a few hundred within a year and tens of e-mails were exchanged daily on the topic of homosexuality in Lebanon. From the mailing list emerged a group of people who met in person to form what they called then ClubFree. SS describes it:

A few of us who used to meet weekly and organize social events (nothing political or activist) decided to start moving forward. An ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) individual member suggested that we form a group that we can register with ILGA and we started meeting at someone’s house every week. We put bylaws and created the name ClubFree. We all had fulltime jobs elsewhere, so it was very difficult to do. ... It took a long time to write the bylaws and agree on them, and then we’d have General Assemblies so after a year we had the bylaws accepted. Then there was the ILGA conference in San Francisco that I went to. I was funded by IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission).

When Helem (Lebanese Protection for LGBTs) was later founded in 2004, by another group of individuals that sprung out of ClubFree, the Internet continued to play an important role in LGBT activism. According to Georges Azzi, who directed Helem for 5 years since its inception, Helem’s online communications strategy developed very “naturally”. He said:

The work on the Internet was very present, and there were very few places ‘on the ground’ that we could use to target the community. There was just Acid (a nightclub in Beirut), and they didn’t really let Helem members be there. So, the use of the net, the mailing lists, and the website, were the most important things.

Helem’s online tools included a website, multiple mailing lists, a chat room that never came close to competing with #gaylebanon, forums that were very active for a year.
between 2005 and 2006, an online donations account with PayPal, a downloadable Barra magazine, a regular PDF newsletter, and after 2008, a Facebook group and Twitter account. In addition to the organized activism, other initiatives sprouted online in the mid-2000s, the most notable of which is the Raynbow Media Monitor that archived all press clippings about homosexuality in the Lebanese media since 1998.

Instant Messaging is one of the more popular online tools that maintained its usefulness over the past 10 years for personal connections and for organizing as well. MSN was the most popular of these and guaranteed mIRC chatroom and Gaydar users follow-up with people they met in chatrooms. LGBTs would use MSN to romance with others and also introduce people to each other on chat. A young woman user, Bloody Mary, recounts:

> It will sound pathetic now, but back in 2004–2005, every time I got a private message from a girl on Gaydar, I wondered to myself: is she the one? Am I going to fall in love with her? ... Friendship was an option, of course, but it came after love. What I really wanted was love, even if its possibility was in the form of weird online strangers.

MSN was also then used for organizing the queer women’s movement that started with Helem Girls. The coordinator created a special MSN address to maintain daily contact with all the members of the community. Ran, a member of Meem, explains:

> [O]ne person on MSN was talking to the girls and spreading information about meetings through personal messages. I know it might sound like a very stupid tool right now, but back then it was very powerful to have... Lesbians back then and still right now are scared to have a face-to-face meeting right away with someone from the community. So to have a person on your MSN contacts list who you can talk to and express your fears to and someone who can convince you to come to the meetings... I think it was a very powerful tool. This was the tool used to gather all the girls and get the numbers.

**Meem’s Early Relationship with the Internet**

From the start, Meem built most of its communications, community-building, awareness-raising, and support strategies using the Internet. One of the founders said in an interview:

> Some [organizations] go to learn about ICTs to support their work. At Meem we had no other choice. We were using ICTs before they became tools for change. Because we had no other choice. Was I supposed to go hang a poster that Meem had a meeting at so and so location? We used to send e-mails. And that’s why we became really experts at [using the Internet]. The Meem blog was created because we needed a place to write. The YouTube channel was launched because we needed a place to post our videos. That [was] the only creative way that we can think of when doing things. Now everyone is using ICTs.

Shant, also one of the Meem founders and coordinator of the communications committee, also explained:
I don’t think Meem would have really existed without all [the ICTs]. I sincerely
don’t... I wonder if it’s because 10 years after the civil war [have passed] —because
usually they feed us this crap that ‘it’s not your time now’ so maybe it was the
timing: 10 years later. I don’t really know...

ICTs also played a crucial role in the creation of alternative media platforms, online
web spaces that civil society in Lebanon sought to improve as social media picked up.
The queer movement saw itself as part and parcel of the movement towards alternative
writing spaces online. Shant notes that because of the Lebanese mainstream media’s
affiliation with established political parties, they are often reluctant to discuss progressive
issues or to portray them positively, so the communications strategy must be crafted
delicately:

Basically all you can do with alternative discourses that are underground is
to create alternative media to house them... and also when you want to make
something mainstream, be smart enough to remain very radical in your discourse
while negotiating ways of passing it through mainstream media.

Therefore, Meem’s strategy focused on creating alternative online media to use as
channels for self-expression (and self-discovery at times) as well as to reach out to the
public without compromising the security of individuals or the group.

Main Issues around Queers and ICTs
Throughout the course of the nearly 13-year old Lebanese queer movement, a variety
of socioeconomic, geopolitical, and gender issues surfaced. These issues influenced the
structural and ideological development of the movement. The authors of this paper
identified a number of overarching issues that the movement faced and sought to tackle
and that continue to form an enduring feature of the movement. Debates around private
versus public and online versus offline spheres of activism, in addition to acceptable
versus harmful expressions of sexuality, are issues that the young queer activists are
tackling on a daily basis, often and still in the face of massive challenges. Panning the
history reveals crucial shifts in agency and power in the relationship between the queer
Lebanese women and the Internet.

Sociopolitics and Privacy
Perhaps one of the most obvious distinct features of the queer movement in Lebanon is
its concern for the protection of personal identities. Members of the LGBT community
were concerned about their personal privacy both online and offline. Therefore, the
movement had to respond to this pressing need voiced by all members of the LGBT
community with varying degrees, from women more than from men, by adapting
its strategies to guard this anonymity and request for privacy. In the formative mIRC
chatrooms, chatroom moderators were tasked with ensuring that participants would
not be “outed”. The moderators themselves maintained anonymity as well because of
the public nature of the chatrooms. Anybody could join and it was often reported that
police informants or users with malicious intentions to bash gays or harass lesbians
were logging in under false pretenses. Although the chat rooms focused on providing
services for LGBTs to meet and/or hook up, the moderators and users were also conscious
of the constructive role the chat rooms played in building a network of support among individuals who shared common forms of oppression. They also served as a source for community news, sometimes trivial and sometimes important. An implicit code of conduct was present among the users and forced outing was seen as destructive behavior that caused harm to many individuals. The mailing lists that were later created maintained a rigorous screening process. In offline spaces, the same code of conduct was maintained: “Everybody knew everybody”, said Shant of the pre-ClubFree period of the movement, “except that when I knew someone, I wouldn’t know that this someone knew a certain other person when in fact he/she also knew that other person. It’s like le secret de Polichinelle in a way...”

Founding queer activists cited social and family taboos, in addition to legal repercussions as the source of recurring fears that confined initial queer interactions to the Internet. The lessons learnt from previous organizing experiences were expressed most pronouncedly by the women who were part of these early communities. Risks ranged from family members accessing individuals’ computers, emails, and chat logs to recognizing their writings or online profiles.

When Meem was founded in 2007 as a lesbian support group, founding members decided early on that privacy guarantees would be of fundamental importance when bringing queer women into the support spaces that they aimed to create. Members were all required to adopt nicknames and to refer to one another using those nicknames. In all written work that emerged out of Meem, most notably its book *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009), a collection of stories from queer women in Lebanon, and Bekhsoos, an online queer Arab magazine, there is little to no mention of the authors’ names or identities. “We live in a society where obviously being gay is not acceptable. Without this privacy our lives would be ruined...”, said Meem member Ran who added: “Of course there are times when you feel like you want people to know that it’s you who wrote this. I’m sure there are times when you feel like you want credit for what you’re doing, but we can’t afford this. This is a compromise you have to make”.

Meemers realized that there was a fine line they must straddle between addressing privacy concerns and boosting the visibility needed to integrate queer issues into the public sociopolitical environment. This is an enduring feature of Bekhsoos’s development, a publication that promotes visibility as an engine for connecting and supporting queers while at the same time protecting the identity of its contributors. In an article entitled “Framing Visibility: Coming Out and the International LGBT Spectrum of Progress”, Lynn, a Meem coordinator, recounts:

Total secrecy would have turned Meem into a static bubble. There had to be a way, an intricate way, to reach out to the queers that we hadn’t reached out to. Some of the ways Meem did this was through writing ... At the time and even today, we are often accused of wanting to take the movement ‘back into the closet’. ... Meem rejects the binary between the closet and coming out — just like we reject gender and sexual binaries. We operate in the grey areas. We are obsessed with writing, producing knowledge, archiving, and we do it all under nicknames or first names. We constantly build up different public platforms so that progressive
and sex positive discussions on sexual and bodily rights are reaching people who are outside of our usual communities. There’s obviously an ambiguous space that comes with this kind of visibility, and we take that ambiguity, that space, to our advantage. We negotiate this ambiguity of spaces and identities according to our own sense of surroundings and judgement. (Lynn, 2010)

The same article critically discusses the international notion of “coming out” and its emphasized relevance to queer movements and presents an account of Meem’s negotiation around visibility and movement-building. Meem’s work is very visible on the Internet with thousands of articles, videos, websites, e-campaigns, and followers on social networks. And yet, the group maintains an invisibility that they see crucial to their work — not only in order to protect the members — but also to remove the spotlight from the queer subjects and place it on the queer experiences. One of the founders explains:

When we first started Meem, we thought we would move from the underground to public space in five years. We assumed that this was the correct linear trajectory to follow. But today, four years into our work, we have realized that these binaries (offline/online) are very limiting, and our work on the Internet allows us to negotiate these ideas. We have been increasing content and reach and it just so happened that the Internet has shifted from an alternative medium to becoming the primary source of information and interaction for a growing population in Lebanon and internationally. And so the question becomes: is our online presence still alternative when the Internet has become so mainstream?

This analysis was also pervasive in the book *Bareed Mistajil*. “At first we thought it was most important to find the stories from the people who wanted to tell them. But as the work on the book progressed, we found it necessary not only to include stories ready to come out, but also to search for those that weren’t ... because each story is a representation of an experience common to hundreds of individuals in Lebanon ... we opted not to use any single name or person for each story”. Because of the crucial role that the Internet plays in queer organizing in most contexts around the world, activists integrated digital security trainings into all capacity-building programs. While the Internet was traditionally a youth sphere where individuals were protected from parental access to ICTs, most recently and with the growing popularity of social networks like Facebook, parents and older family members started gaining more access to profiles and networks of their children. A re-evaluation of privacy in these shifting times has become more pressing. Another Bekhsoos article, “Your Mom Has Added You on Facebook”, states:

[F]or the first time in a long time, my virtual gayness found itself thinking about e-closets again. Was I revealing too much online? [...] Online privacy and security has always been a central issue for queer communities, who are known to use anonymous log-ins, nicknames, multiple online identities, and other strategies to protect ourselves from outing. The need to systematize and think collectively about these strategies will only become more crucial as new social media trends push online users to reveal more and more about their preferences, purchases, locations, connections, and everyday activities. (Nadz, 2010)
This is yet another example of the ways in which social surveillance often mattered as much, if not more, than state surveillance, necessitating that Meem’s privacy policies be intricate and constantly in flux.

**Gender Politics: Access, Privacy, and Usage**

Much has been posited about gender usage of ICTs, especially across the Arab world, where women’s freedoms are restricted by strict social and legal codes. There has been recent movement with respect to this theme on the part of both techie communities and feminists, and more recently through the visible role of women within Arab revolutions — both on the ground and in online activism.

Arab Techies, a collective of Arab technology geeks formed in 2008, held an Arab Women Techies meeting in Zouk, Lebanon in May 2010 following the poor participation of women in the Arab Techies meeting. The purpose of the meeting, according to one of its organizers, Manal Bahey El-Din Hassan, was to build more connections among women geeks in order to support their participation in tech collectives.

From the other activist end of the issue, a group of young feminists founded Take Back the Tech Arabia in April 2010 to serve four goals: highlighting gender issues in Arab tech collectives, building ICT capacity of young women, encouraging girls in school to pursue tech studies, and developing programs and codes that are of use to women’s rights advocates and feminists fighting discrimination and violence.¹⁸

**Gradual Access to Online Spaces**

As women have less access to public spaces than men, the same problem was reflected online when the LGBT community first went on the Internet to build content and connect members with each other. Women were a very small minority in the chat rooms, mailing lists, forums, and as content-producers. While the very small percentage of women accessing offline spaces such as ClubFree activities, gay nightclubs and pubs, and Helem, was understandable because of restrictions on curfews and mobility, their absence from online spaces was less clearly explainable. According to SS, an early member of the queer community in Lebanon:

> #gaylebanon was not a private place to be in ... it was 99 percent male, it was difficult to trust people, but once in a while I would come across some people I could talk to, and I made friendships that have lasted to this day ... the [ClubFree] meetings had very few girls; two to three at most. Once we had a picnic, there were two girls and 55 guys.

Despite common struggles as homosexuals, except for small circles, few women were able to integrate into the male-dominated spaces. The cover story of the second issue of Barra magazine addressed lesbian invisibility asking the question: “Where are the girls?

Our interviewees expressed that, in retrospect, it was a lack of privacy within the women’s families, a lack of courage due to internalized sexism, and difficulty of identifying with the LGBT community that made online access difficult. Even with the

guarantee of anonymity online, young women were intimidated by the possibility of a family member discovering their online activities and by the generally aggressive atmosphere in chat rooms and forums. Anonymity was critical but it did not suffice alone to encourage queer women to speak up and connect with others. In later sections of our analysis we will see how a complementary offline supportive community broke many barriers of fear among women to express themselves online as well.

The key strategy of creating women-only spaces allowed women within the LGBT community to gain a vocal, strong, and lesbian expression that later developed into a queer feminist discourse. What was particularly successful about lesbian organizing that boomed by the beginning of 2008 was not that it was online. Indeed, there were many offline Meem-facilitated spaces. But communication was always maintained online in deliberate and personalized ways. All public lesbian activism was done online, creating a clear-cut separation of activities. The first were in-person meetings that were extremely confidential, banned the taking of photos, and prohibited the revealing of personal information. The second were online expressions of voices that were securely anonymous but that were promoted to the public in ripple-effect word-of-mouth strategies. Examples of these were the YouTube videos\(^{19}\) launched in the summer of 2008, the early Bekhsoos issues,\(^{20}\) and the blog.\(^{21}\)

**A Safe Space Online**

For young women in particular, the growth of an organized constituency online allowed much-needed privacy and security, as well as a nurturing environment to talk about taboo sexuality issues. The significance of the ICTs strategy employed by the queer women’s community is not so much that they were able to use the technology to advance their issues, but more that this strategy was given priority over other more traditional ways of organizing. The activists considered the mantra “we must write”\(^{22}\) infinitely more significant than “we must come out” for example. And while interviewees expressed that in the early stages they thought that they would be moving from online to offline spaces, once they did, they realized that they must move simultaneously online as well. Privacy and allowing the young women to come out or identify themselves at their own pace was a central component of their work. All stories published in Bekhsoos are written from the perspective of someone who has experienced gender discrimination, bias, stereotyping, and restrictions. Bekhsoos includes topics that are taboo even in the queer community: body ownership, frank expressions of sexuality, stories of molestation, and other powerful acts of coming to terms with gender-based violence. Similarly to how Meem was founded as a response to the lack of safe, empowering spaces for women in LGBT spaces, Bekhsoos was focused on filling up the empty spaces where women’s voices could be heard. News related to sexuality in the Arab world are reported (or covered) through women’s experiences. Echoed in all these pieces are the words of Audre Lorde: “It’s a struggle but that’s why we exist, so that another generation of lesbians of color will not have to invent themselves, or their history, all over again”.

**Intersections of Gender and Class**

Access to the Internet in Lebanon is limited to economically able groups because of the high price of connections and mobile data plans. Therefore, queers of lower classes have little access to content, information, and networks online. Class divisions surfaced as a
prominent problem in Lebanon’s queer community, which is split between supporters of the flourishing gay nightlife venues and critics of its benefit to the community. Some argue that having more “gay-friendly” businesses attracts more gay tourists and opens up spaces for queers to meet and hang out. Others have argued that these venues give a false sense of freedom and encourage a consumerist behavior among the Lebanese queer community and facilitates the further isolation of the majority who cannot afford the increasingly expensive restaurants and clubs, which are restricted to premium locations in Beirut.

A recent article published on the occasion of International Women’s Day in *Al-Akhbar*, a mainstream leftist newspaper, entitled “Lebanese lesbian and gay rights: Down with sectarianism” stirred controversy among the activists. Written by President of the Helem board Hiba Abbani (2011), the article challenges the notion that “the situation for queers in Lebanon has improved drastically with the opening of many bars, clubs, restaurants, and saunas in addition to businesses that cater to the gay community”, a promotional statement issued by organizers of the IGLTA symposium in Beirut in 2010. Abbani argues that the reality on the ground is very different from the one promoted for commercial gains and that, indeed, many political and socio-economic factors prevent a large segment of the queer community from identifying with the elites who benefit from the consumerist services. She called for a deeper understanding of the effects of sectarian politics on the community at large and for stronger demands by the movement to address these pressing issues. The article was met with much criticism by gay male activists who argued that the movement has catered to all strata of Lebanese society and that gay-friendly businesses were a vital part of the local movement in the same way that parts of gay history developed in different parts of the world (mostly the Western world).

Self-Representation and the Creation of E-Narratives on Bekhsoos.com

This section will trace the evolution of the narrative that Meem has consciously sought to create throughout its growth. The section will focus on Meem’s weekly online publication Bekhsoos.com, a website that describes itself as a “queer Arab weekly magazine” and whose articles have been read over 400,000 times since September 2009. At the time of writing this article, Bekhsoos had 420 posts and 2,339 comments. Anyone in the Arab region who wishes to discuss queer Arab issues is invited to contribute, as a means of self-representation. We examine the conditions out of which Bekhsoos emerged in relation to Meem’s development as well as that of the larger queer movement in Lebanon.

This case study examines the content of Bekhsoos articles and its editorial processes. It attempts to gauge the networks that Bekhsoos’s readership and its pool of contributors have given shape to. We also seek to flesh out the effects that Bekhsoos has had on the queer movement itself, against the backdrop of growing Internet usage, the emergence of social networks, and movements for online freedoms. Bekhsoos is selected because of a number of elements that make for an interesting case: the combination of various ICT tools on the magazine’s platform, the authors’ navigation of anonymity within wide exposure and reach, and the fact that the website was launched at a strategic meeting point of both the LGBT movement and the Lebanese blogosphere. Additionally, because
the magazine is primarily a space for women and transgender writers, its content sheds light on the gendered usage of the Internet in the queer community. “I think it was just natural that Bekhsoos would come to be, to be very honest. It was clear from the begining that there was a need for people to write and to express what they wanted to say...” says Shant. Bekhsoos.com was launched in June 2008 as an “Arab lesbian online magazine published quarterly by Meem cover[ing] topics related to homosexuality in the Arab world”. The “About Us” page on July 1, 2010 defines Bekhsoos as a “queer Arab magazine published weekly by queer and trans folks at Meem cover[ing] topics related to (homo)sexuality in the Arab world”. The evolution between the two descriptions is reflective of the evolution of the magazine’s politics as well as the personal politics of the collective behind it. It is, in fact, the magazine as an online space for personal expression and political self-reflection that facilitated this process of “queering” the LGBT movement itself. Late 2010 saw the emergence of a dozen gay and lesbian blogs that narrated stories of being gay in Lebanon. This is a result both of Bekhsoos’s influence and also of the increased power of the ICT environment as an alternative space for self-expression.

The newer version of Bekhsoos.com was launched on September 7, 2009 by a Meem committee initiated by two key members: an English editor and an Arabic editor. The idea to publish weekly had been proposed by the English editor at a Meem meeting in August and in the form of a challenge to the collective that had grown to reach over 300 members over the course of 2 years. In her opening editorial, she writes: “This is the new Bekhsoos [...] we’ve decided to publish weekly. Yes, that’s a huge commitment ... We’re putting ourselves to the challenge of publishing at least 5-6 articles weekly because we want to be on top of information technology today” (Nadz, 2010). She continues:

The age of ‘wow, gay groups in Lebanon, that alone is impressive’ is over. It’s not impressive anymore. Now is the time for us to become engaged with our own societies, to think analytically, to advance politically, to understand the truth about oppression, to create, to research, to be proactive, to write, to write, to write! (Nadz, 2010)

The motivation depicted in this editorial became the driving spirit of the magazine as the team persisted in self-publishing week after week. “Every Tuesday, we hold an editorial meeting to discuss the articles of the next issue. We brainstorm ideas, we discuss current events, and we assign an article topic to every writer”. All articles are due on Saturdays. According to the team, on average, half of the articles agreed upon are actually delivered on time every week. The weekly target is between 10 and 15 articles.

The team refuses to use any funding money for the production of Bekhsoos whether technically or to pay for articles, graphic design, or editing. It doesn’t even solicit donations on its website. What it does solicit is more readership because it depends primarily on word of mouth for its readership to grow organically, rather than sporadically. There is a safety in that strategy. It is very similar to the strategy Meem used to gain membership.

We’ve gotten to a stage where our readers expect their issue every week, and that’s what keeps us motivated. It’s very powerful — far more powerful than if we were,
say, getting paid or in some sort of competition to win something. It’s even more powerful than our ‘LGBT’ cause in abstraction. Knowing people are out there — hundreds of them — waiting for Bekhsoos is all the motivation we need.

The Value of Personal Stories
Interestingly, the new weekly Bekhsoos was launched only 3 months after the successful launch of Meem’s first book *Bareed Mista3jil* in a staged performance and also across Lebanese bookstores. The collection of 41 personal stories from a diversity of Lebanese queer women and transgenders proved popular in LGBT as well as mainstream communities. An *Agence France Presse* (AFP) article said: “Often silenced and marginalised by society and overshadowed by their straight, siliconed counterparts promoted in the media, the stories of Lebanon’s other women have resonated with local and international audiences, and the book has been reprinted after the first batch of hundreds sold out” (Yazbeck, 2009). Weeks after the launch of the book, positive book reviews were coming out in newspapers, blogs, and magazines much to the empowerment of the community which was being significantly heard for the first time in the oppressed group’s history. The need to continue to tell other stories, more stories, more points of view, more experiences, more secrets, more celebrations, was rising and paved the way for the launch of a rigorous Bekhsoos that carried the volume and sensitivities of bearing witness to personal narratives.

Documentation and Archive-Building
“Our objective is to fill the gap of lesbian and transgender-produced writing in the Arab world through articles, reports, investigations, personal stories, opinion pieces, and creative writing”, reads the “About Us” page of Bekhsoos. Several of Meem’s founders expressed that they viewed Bekhsoos’s archiving function as serving purposes that were both practical and ideological. “The documentation of history bears significance not only for posterity but also serves as current useful guide for LGBTs continuing to organize in different ways in other Arab countries. It also fosters the habit of writing one’s own history, rather than leaving it to researchers, historians, and professionals”, says one interviewee.

Meem members expressed a wish to use Bekhsoos as a testament to the evolution of their development in sexual rights issues and other fields of activism that branch out of that, including feminism and anti-colonialism. Moreover, Bekhsoos encourages its members to document as well as reflect upon events that Meem participates in and organizes. This, Meem says, provides the queer movement with a richer historical record to refer to than mere log taking. Building an archive also allows Meem to fulfill its aim of saturating the Arab Internet space with queer issues, so that those interested in getting information about queer Arabs through a search engine or social networking sites, perhaps, will easily find Bekhsoos content. This, says one of Meem’s founders, ensures that indigenous queer voices do not become drowned out by Orientalist examinations of ‘queers’ in the Arab world [that a growing number of scholars, notably Joseph Massad]. Archiving also leads to a form of ‘queering’. By publishing a lot of queer content related to issues such as Apartheid, colonialism and feminism — subjects that yield tens of matches on Bekhsoos’s search engine, Bekhsoos is able to inject a queer perspective into discussions about those issues in this region. This strategy is
illustrated in an April 2010 article that offers an analysis of Meem’s role in feminist regional networks:

If we were to trace our steps over those two years from the Marrakech conference to the Amman meeting, we would be able to map out Meem’s strategy in pushing Arab women’s organizations to become safe spaces for lesbians, transgenders, and people of alternative sexualities ... we educated each other on women’s issues other than sexuality and trained our members on gender equality. We placed lesbian and trans people’s issues within a broader framework of sexual and bodily rights. (Nadz, 2010)

**Politics of Inclusion**

One of the objectives of Bekhsoos, extracted from its “we must write” motto is to promote the act of writing as a tool of personal healing and power. Writing allows individuals to think, formalize ideas in their heads, organize thoughts, challenge themselves, and then voice it. The act of writing things out provides clarity and eases the pain of repression. Repression is a common feeling in the queer women’s community in Lebanon, which has little room for talking, expressing, and letting things out. By publishing weekly, Bekhsoos allows space for large quantities of articles (40-50 on average every month). This encourages individuals to write and aim to get published. According to Ran, one of the writers on the team, a significant strength of Bekhsoos is that it places a team of volunteer editors, in all three languages, at the service of members of the community who want to submit their work:

The inability to write well may impede a lot of women from expressing themselves. Knowing that you can send your submission to editors who will fix it up and correct all the mistakes and make it publishable is very encouraging for those who are not comfortable with or used to writing.

Bekhsoos’s editors recognize that writing is not accessible to everyone in the societies that it interacts with. It aims to make the writing process easier by having one-to-one communication with potential contributors and making the editorial process a rigorous one. That is one of the primary reasons why *Bareed Mista3jil* was not a submissions-based project but one written using the interviews technique. In addition, the question of who the author or illustrator is, presents an important criterion of what gets published. While the magazine generally tries to adhere to certain publishing standards in article quality, the editorial policy allows for compromises with regards to quality to encourage first-time authors and expressions that may not otherwise pass the publishing standards. “Sometimes it is more important at the level of personal empowerment that one person see their work published and read than for the article to be fantastically written or politically sharp”, said the magazine’s Arabic editor, Aphrodite. “It’s a constant editorial decision that we have to make in almost every issue”, she adds. More than half of the Bekhsoos articles are in English, the rest in Arabic, and a small percentage (less than 5 percent) in French.

**Transcending Boundaries and Occupation**

After Meem, the most active group using Bekhsoos as a vehicle for queer self-expression
is Aswat, a support group for Palestinian queer women living under Israeli occupation. Aswat are a group of self-organized young queer women who work on the support and empowerment of their community. Because they are Palestinians living in the Israeli state, which is officially considered to be at war with Lebanon by the Lebanese authorities, communication is restricted between them and Lebanese activists. Meetings between Lebanese activists and Palestinians who hold Israeli passports is risky and could lead to criminal persecution in Lebanon. Through the Internet, activists on both sides of the borders have found a common space to discuss and share strategies such as community organizing, queering the Arabic language, and lobbying against the Israeli occupation and normalization with Israel.

A quick search of the term “Aswat” in English and Arabic on Bekhsoos.com yields over 30 links, most of them submissions by Aswat members to Bekhsoos. Submissions reflect either a Palestinian experience or a political stand vis-à-vis Palestine. The statement by Arab queers against the Zionist “Stand With Us” workshop planned for the US Social Forum published on June 15, 2010 catapulted into the Top 10 read articles with 1167 reads within a week of its publishing. By publishing a number of articles on the topic of Israeli “pinkwashing”, Bekhsoos situated itself as a strategic portal in the struggle against Israeli usage of LGBTs as propaganda to hide its war crimes and apartheid. In early 2011, Aswat then launched their own magazine in print and online, see www.3ashtar.com.

This political feature of Bekhsoos is significant on a number of inter-related levels. Meem’s insistence on connecting queer struggles with other forms of struggle is an important facilitator of discussions around Israeli apartheid given that the occupation to the south of the border is a contentious topic in Lebanon. However, it is this subject in turn which provides queers in Lebanon with a geopolitical distinctiveness within the global queer movement. Bekhsoos’s critiques and refusal of Israeli pinkwashing has frequently put it at odds with global gay discourse, causing it to add nuance to the global gay landscape. By rallying around resistance to Israeli apartheid, writers from Meem and Aswat strengthen connections between the two movements that enable queer issues in both countries to be better integrated into a regional framework. There is frequently an interweaving of queer and apartheid issues in articles published by these two organizations.

**Bypassing Censorship Restrictions**

The technology behind Bekhsoos.com also carries political implications for communication rights and freedom of speech. The site is currently in its third version, having moved from simple php to Drupal and is now run on Wordpress, which has quickly become a popular open-source software for blogs and dynamic websites in Lebanon. The significance of using open source is that it is politically aligned with the activist movement towards freer open Internet tools.

Subscription to the website is available through a Facebook page, Twitter account, email subscription, and RSS feeds by page, category, author, and tag. The RSS feeds are an important strategy utilized to bypass censorship restrictions by different private and governmental filtering that filters by keyword or by IP address. Lebanese blogger...
Jad Aoun posted about the re-launch of Bekhsoos with a screenshot of the warning graphic used by UAE ISP that reads: “Surf Safely! This website is not accessible in the UAE. The Internet is a powerful medium for communication, sharing, and serving our daily learning needs. However, the site you are trying to access contains content that is prohibited under the ‘Internet Access Management Regulatory Policy’ of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates”. Dozens of Arab Internet users have written to Bekhsoos to complain that the website is blocked in their city.

The ongoing problem of censorship of material related to LGBT in specific and to sexuality in general is rarely addressed in Arab discourse. The new draft law mentioned in the section on legal regulation of the Internet in Lebanon carried dangerous implications for queer expressions in private as well as public online forums. “We have been publishing queer material online for many years, protected by a cloak of anonymity and privacy”, Bekhsoos.com editor commented on the new law, “but now, and out of the blue, this new law threatens to silence, censor, and implicate us in a random manner”. Members of the queer tech community joined the coalition working to reform the law and stressed the important aspect of defending freedom of expression around sexuality in the debates held among activists studying the proposed law. One of these queer activists who attended the strategy meetings stated in a follow-up interview:

When you’re collectively facing a threat to your freedom of expression, it becomes easier to drive home the point that queers have a right to that freedom too. Even if among those meeting there are people who are homophobic, they will still defend your right to freedom of speech because they are facing that threat to their own freedoms too. I feel that we have built an unlikely alliance that will protect us from online persecution or silencing in the future.

Geo-Politics and Queer Lebanese and Palestinian Resistance

Lebanon’s past and present as the object of neo-imperialistic designs makes the queer experience akin to walking on a tightrope. Two geopolitical factors over the past ten years have made the Lebanese queer experience especially complex. The first relates to the second Bush administration’s aggressive Democracy Promotion policies of which Lebanon was a strategic target. This came packaged with a set of liberal ideals that aimed to lure in many with promises of new individual freedoms. During Israel’s war on Lebanon in July 2006, as US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice’s pronouncement of the dawn of “A New Middle East” reverberated across the region, queers in Lebanon took a stand that would prove to be monumental to their movement. In a televised address to the 2006 Montreal Outgames, Helem member Rasha Mounmeh remarked that being gay in Lebanon would not prevent Lebanese queers from standing in solidarity with Arabs in Gaza and Lebanon whom Israel had slain. “We do not accept democracy at the barrel of a gun,” said Mounmeh, “we do not expect to be liberated through war, if the price of that liberty is our lives meted out in collateral terms” (Mounmeh, 2006).

The second very pertinent factor that has influenced the way the queer movement views geopolitics relates to the position of prominence that Israel has strategically assumed on the international queer arena. Jasbir Puar (2011) of The Guardian reports:
Israel is invested in a large-scale, massively funded Brand Israel campaign, produced by the Israeli foreign ministry, to counter its growing reputation as an imperial aggressor...one of the most remarkable features of the Brand Israel campaign is the marketing of a modern Israel as a gay-friendly Israel.

Queers in Lebanon have consciously sought to detach themselves from the gay discourse that Israel began to co-opt and have regularly voiced their opposition to Israeli colonization. The global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement has served as a potent medium in this regard and it has served as a cohesive component in its relationship with other queers in the region, notably those in occupied Palestine. The global and regional dynamics of queers against Israeli apartheid are demonstrated and reinforced by Bekhsoos. Moumneh’s keynote speech at the Copenhagen Outgames in 2009 elaborates on this political stand:

There is an unfortunate tendency within the [global LGBT] movement towards a reduction of people’s multiple selves into a single aspect employed falsely in place of the whole: in this context, sexuality and gender identity. By doing this, by positing a ‘global gay citizen’ stripped of context, of environment, of relationships, of community, of a politics, in order to sustain the myth of a ‘happy global gay family’, we are doing harm... it is incumbent upon us, as LGBT activists, to know, to seek out information about the world we build our activism around, to understand its complexities and intersections and to create a progressive and inclusive politics of justice, because the lies we are fed come in so thick and so heavy that it takes energy and commitment to sift through them to get to our truths.

The above quotation encapsulates the many issues that queers in the region have had to grapple with and demonstrates that the gay experience in the region is often at odds with the ‘international gay discourse’ in ways that cannot be ignored. From the beginnings of the queer movement, the impulse to localize the struggle has been potent and can be seen to have led to the genesis of the movement in the form of the mIRC chatroom #gaylebanon. Sentiments like that of #MiRC founder, TouchE, that reflect a disconnect between the realities of local queer spaces and international queer spaces (as well within local queer spaces) would become a mainstay of a movement that continues to try to “understand its complexities and intersections and to create a progressive and inclusive politics of justice”.

In trying to reconcile the realities of occupation and imperialism with queerness, the queer movement, and particularly Meem, has come to position itself as a platform that connects a variety of struggles, globally, regionally, and locally. Imperialism in other parts of the world and repression of Arabs in some countries are often brought to light. There is an awareness of issues related to class, refugees, and migrant workers that underpins nearly every piece in Bekhsoos. This political awareness, Meem members insist, did not come about from textbooks or outside interference, but grew organically from within the group and was informed by personal experiences. As one interviewed member stated:

When we started out, our collective political understanding was very limited and all we really wanted was to be in a gay, positive, and healthy environment. But
with time, new members who joined brought their own perspectives, experiences, and oppressions in a way, and the interconnectedness of just causes became visible in front of us. Our queer feminism then expanded and continued to expand with our exposure to different causes carried by diverse individuals who come to Meem. But it is still that one common thread that brings people to and keeps people in Meem: a common experience of injustice based on sexuality.

Conclusion
Throughout our research, we sought to map out the contours of the Arab ICT environment as it relates to the queer ICT movement in Lebanon. We aimed to show that the majority of the Arab region is hostile to free expression on the Internet and that while Lebanon enjoys a unique status with respect to freedom of expression within this region, its social, political, and economic boundaries are porous and volatile and therefore vulnerable to change. Our findings demonstrate the degree to which queer women in Lebanon have benefitted from the space that a free ICT environment offered. We hoped to show how this environment is an engine for both political and personal growth.

We attempted to highlight that ICTs provided a portal for queer women to not only consume information about queer issues — something that was greatly lacking in Lebanon’s traditional media — but also to produce and disseminate information about themselves for others to read and experience. From the beginning of the movement there was an impulse to create local queer spaces in the virtual world because the disconnection between local experiences and the Western-dominated global online spaces was clear to most Lebanese queers. As the movement evolved in shape and in its global standing the urge to articulate that disconnect became strong and resulted in the creation of such publications as Barra, Sou7aq, Bekhsoos and Bareed Mista3jil. The more successful of these publications functioned through a consciously decided upon set of editorial principles that ensured accessibility of both readership and writership to all queer women. They ensured also that the publications would act as a platform for all struggles so that the specificities of Lebanon’s queer women’s situation could be incorporated into the discourses the movement aimed to create.

In 2011, a remarkable scandal erupted online with the revelation that the presumed Syrian blogger “Gay Girl in Damascus” was actually a married heterosexual American Man in Scotland, Tom MacMaster. 29 It was quickly followed by other similar exposures that catapulted the issue of representation and the authenticity of voices. Bloggers and journalists debated the harmful actions of MacMaster and the questions they raised on anonymity versus trustworthiness online. In the light of the global attention to these questions, we believe the research and in particular its findings on self-representation are crucial to promoting greater understandings of such complexities.

As the queer women’s movement evolved in Lebanon, it became increasingly clear that geopolitical realities could not be detached from the discourses that queers in the region were trying to create. Geopolitics, specifically with respect to the Israeli occupation and Arab authoritarianism, had to be incorporated into the queer Arab reality. The politics of inclusion that Bekhsoos adopted allowed struggles to organically intersect. They also

brought in Palestinian queers who would otherwise be inaccessible due to occupations and borders. This sheds significant light on the ongoing online debates between Palestinian queers and Israeli queers who are battling over entitlement to the “authentic” voice of LGBTs in the Middle East.

The pervasiveness and institutionalization of homophobia and transphobia across the Arab world makes it counter-productive to use the argument that the Internet should remain free so that sexual minorities may find room to express themselves. That is why our analysis focused on methods activists use to maneuver between censorship and advocacy. It is most likely that the movement for communication rights and that of queer rights will continue to progress in parallel as techies fight for an open Internet and queers fight for recognition and human rights. What is clear from the findings, however, is that the intersection of the two movements, embodied in the queer techies, allows for spaces to join forces and present the argument that expressions of sexuality should always be on the table when it comes to advocating for online freedom of speech. It is crucial that all social justice movements are aware of and work for a freer, more open Internet. Online trends suggest that the Internet will continue to be a space that mirrors offline interactions and public opinion and many of the interviewees expressed feelings that the two spheres will eventually merge into one and the same. And so the investment in online presence, content, and the mastering of technologies becomes a crucial component of any strategizing in Arab countries.

The demand for a free Internet in the Arab world is not only in sync with the larger demand for freedom of expression and speech, but it is also significant to maintain the Internet as a space for all self-expression and as an alternative room for activists to organize, advocate, mobilize, and raise awareness. Perhaps nothing in our modern history has made a stronger case for this than the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and the ongoing revolutions of the ‘Arab Spring’.

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Nasawiya: A New Faction in the Women’s Movement

Sandy El-Hage

This article is extracted from an M.A. thesis entitled “Transnational Activism in Lebanon Women’s Movement: Between Fitna, Fawda, and Feminism” prepared by Sandy El-Hage and submitted as part of the requirements of the Master of Arts in International Affairs at the School of Arts and Sciences, the Lebanese American University. The following excerpt focuses on the creation of Nasawiya, a collective of feminists (women and men) working on gender justice and striving to challenge all forms of gender oppression in Lebanon and the Arab world, and the alternative discourse it offers.

Organizing Nasawiya

Nasawiya: A New Faction in the Women’s Movement

This article documents the transnational features of the feminist collective Nasawiya. It posits that Nasawiya is an alternative feminist social movement within Lebanon’s women’s movement for gender justice and equality because of its grassroots, bottom-up nature, and the organizational structure of this collective which consists of a loose network of activists.

The greatest difference between Nasawiya and other women’s advocacy groups in the women’s movement lies in the campaign approaches and discourse surrounding “initiatives”, or grassroots projects enacted by an individual or group of activists from the collective. This article delineates the various initiatives and campaigns, instigated by Nasawiya activists thus far, and addresses pitfalls in organizing Nasawiya.

Nasawiya’s founding principles aim to sever what is described as the oppressive nature of NGOs and transnational networks that stagger against Lebanon’s unchanging elitist decision-making body. In its formative stage, Nasawiya established a feminist, women’s advocacy group that experimented with various means to organize for an alternative civil society. This alternative is sustained through three approaches unseen in Lebanon’s existing civil society: entrepreneurial feminism, feminist collectivity, and online feminism. The most prominent facet to organizing activism within Nasawiya relies on its inherently grassroots structure:

At Nasawiya, we do not have a traditional NGO structure of boards, staff, and volunteers. We are a member-driven collective where everyone is equal and in support of each other’s activism. We believe that we are stronger together. (Nasawiyas, Who are Nasawiyas?, n.d.)
Among other characteristics, the collective approach is one that sets Nasawiya apart from the prevailing "personalistic style" organizing around a single leader in prominent women’s advocacy groups (Bray-Collins, 2003, p. 76). Furthermore, this collective approach assists in sustaining Nasawiya’s genuinely grassroots, bottom-up movement.

The transnationality of Nasawiya as a movement is evident within two spheres: a domestic coalition of feminist activists; and a social movement with transnational, regional, and international networks. Before delineating Nasawiya as a transnational feminist and a national social movement in Lebanon, the following sections will briefly introduce Nasawiya as a collective based on the movement’s origin, objective, structure of organizing, and the current campaign initiatives enacted by the independent activists of Nasawiya.

Nasawiya has evolved into a feminist movement for the reclamation of public spaces for feminist sensitization in a cultural setting overrun by male chauvinism. Since the movement’s origin, activism has focused on consciousness raising campaigns on feminism and workshops for transformative change at the most grassroots, community level. Founding feminist activists of Nasawiya originally began organizing for bodily rights and sexuality awareness with LGBTQI non-profit groups Meem and Helem and in association with transnational networks in the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR). Since 2004, the organization Helem has been prominently working to “[lead] a peaceful struggle for the liberation [and awareness] of non-conforming sexuality and gender identity in Lebanon”. Helem’s main objective is to revoke article 534 of the penal code, which upholds “unnatural sexual intercourse” to be punishable by law (Helem, 2012).

Meem was created by activists who wanted to build a space for sexually non-conforming women to organize, while Helem slowly became a movement for sexually non-conforming men (Meem, 2007). In retrospect, the fact that Meem became an offshoot of Helem was a sign of fragmentation between differing perspectives on gender relations among activists themselves. In a blog post from Nfasharte (2012), a former member of Helem wrote:

I’d like to speak about my experience as a woman inside this organization [i.e. Helem] and my relationship with its members and leaders. A strange feeling crept up on me as I got to know many members better, when I discovered that the way they greet women is not through a handshake, but through grabbing her breasts...This idea in particular, that women’s bodies are public and revolve around men’s sexuality and desire, forms the basis of the patriarchal system that discriminates against me as a woman and makes me pay very dearly for my non-normative personal choices... Among the other things that reproduce patriarchal structures among many members of Helem is the image they have of femininity, the same image in the mainstream social imagination: superficial, gossipy, catty, enemies with other women and obsessed with the world of fashion and beauty with the goal of attracting men. I have always fought against this in my personal life, and I’ve always had my own standards.

1. Despite Lebanon’s lack of recognition, Helem is a non-profit, non-governmental organization registered in Canada, France, and the United States with branches in Montreal, Paris, and San Francisco (Helem, 2008).
of beauty and my own non-normative version of femininity. Women who fall outside social norms of beauty and femininity are considered by the men of Helem to be ‘abnormal’, ‘angry lesbians’, ‘ugly’, ‘dirty’ and ‘smelly’... This general anti-woman atmosphere created the perfect breeding environment for sexual harassment.

All of this verbal and physical harassment has bothered me and many other women in Helem. There was never any genuine attempt to solve the problem, and so many women ended up leaving the organization completely. The lack of serious engagement was always tied to a patriarchal structure within the organization that absolves those who discriminate and harass. This structure becomes clear in the reactions that inevitably follow any complaint: blaming the victim, relegating the problem to a just a few bad apples, and mocking the women, among other oppressive strategies designed to silence anyone who dares to speak out. I think today is finally the time for these violations against women’s bodies to stop. I am speaking out now so that this doesn’t happen again to other women in the future. (Helem and Sexual, 2012)

The experience of this former member of Helem shows that the seed of gender-based violence in Lebanon is even perpetuated between factions who identify themselves as subjects of this discrimination. The pervasiveness of gender-based violence and sexual harassment is attributed to “outside factors” that have shaped the “mechanism” of Helem’s organizational structure. Three components of social behavior are described to have caused a schism over gender-based violence between men and women in the LGBTQI community: character assassination, shaming and silencing, and lack of accountability:

As with all previous instances of organization-splitting arguments, the immediate reaction by most of those involved was to sweep it all under a carpet and pretend it never happened. This was done, first of all, by framing it as a ‘personal argument’ that, apparently, does not reflect negatively on the politics of the organization as a whole. Secondly, there was shameless pride from some of the members and key people in the organization and community in having ‘defeated’ the ‘evil terrorists’ by shaming them into leaving. Thirdly, after this event and during Helem’s general assembly, the same members who participated in sexist slander suddenly started speaking about ‘women’s rights’ and about how making a ‘safe space for women should become a priority for Helem. Those same people refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing or apologize for their hurtful and misogynist remarks and actions, and continued to slander women who spoke up not just in Lebanon, but regionally. While they might think that saying tokenistic phrases about women’s rights may shield them from criticism, it is their actual actions that count and that show otherwise. (Helem and the, 2012)

The case of Helem can be seen as a “microcosm of gender-based violence” in Lebanon. Former members who have come forth with testimonies have emphasized that the objective to their narratives is not to slander the organization as a whole, but rather
to contextualize the extent of patriarchal organizing, misogyny, the inherent ‘male-privilege’ in institutions, and the pitfalls of NGO tactics in Lebanon’s civil society. For this study, the relevance of these incidents provides further details of the impetus for grassroots activists in Lebanon to build a genuinely feminist movement.

Although the grassroots community of activists has been organizing for years in Lebanon, the origins of Nasawiya date to 2007. To commemorate International Women’s Day on 10 March 2007, activists hosted an event that would be “[t]he first of its kind in being organized by young women and also being able to bring together different women figures and groups [in Lebanon]” (S. A. G., personal communication, August 29, 2012).

The intention to organize for International Women’s Day (IWD) 2007 was described as follows:

[We] [i]nvite you to attend, participate and celebrate with us in an event sparking a new initiative within the cultural and social realm of Beirut: ‘Women’s Day’. An initiative that aims to bring women and women friendly people together so that they may jointly think and explore tools of work having a direct impact in women’s lives. Our aim is to celebrate with all of you who have worked, struggled, fought, felt mistreated and marginalized to come together for a second round, with an uprising generation of young women and men determined to bring equality within their present. (Taharar!, n.d.)

This event will be a scheme where culture and social initiative will be to create and thus build a concrete network working on women and tackling women issues from a different perspective. This space will be mixed between employee women, journalists, politicians, and artists. We will be together to share their experiences and to fix a program to continue their demands on the political, economical [sic], and personal level.2

These promotional descriptions of IWD 2007 in Lebanon reflect the desire for a renewed women’s movement. Simultaneously, the means to organize coincided with international interest in funding human rights campaigns in the region.

In 2008, along with the momentum of KAFA’s campaign against gender-based violence, Banat Akhir Zaman simultaneously emerged with aspirations to become a proactive, grassroots, feminist campaign for bodily rights. Over the previous year, feminist activists began reclaiming web spaces online to publish feminist critiques of the state of women in Lebanon. From a blog post by campaign members in Banat Akhir Zaman, the feminist campaign was fuelled by the social perception that women in Lebanon are as liberated as their bodies, based on their portrayal in the media:

When one attempts at discussing the status of women in Lebanon these days and comparing it with that of women in the Arab world, challengers ignorantly bring about the stereotypes of the women at the forefront of Lebanese media.
as examples to back their invalid arguments... outsiders believe that the typical seemingly liberated bodies that are circulated around all the music channels actually do represent the whole of the situation of Lebanese women. Wrong. (Banat Akhir Zaman, 2008)

Following the momentum of the mainstream women’s movement, and particularly KAFA’s campaigns, the ‘alternative’, feminist women’s movement gained traction as a grassroots effort. In January 2009, campaign members of Banat Akhir Zaman bonded with independent activists for a Feminist Collective to create a “platform to allow different feminists to work on different groups in one office” (Saade, 2009). By International Women’s Day on March 8, 2009, the campaign for Banat Akhir Zaman coalesced into a formative collective of activists among Lebanon’s feminists for a social movement and “the first group of its kind in Lebanon” (Goodman, 2009). Known as Beirut’s Feminist Collective, the movement organized its first demonstration to commemorate the universal day to protest the status of women in Lebanon. IWD 2009 occurred in the midst of controversial electoral reforms and just before national elections.

IWD 2009 would be the beginning of an annual tradition for feminist activists from Nasawiya to take to the streets and engage the people of Lebanon in grassroots activism. Dubbed as Hello Women in 2012, the campaign for IWD followed very basic structures of organizing seen throughout women’s movements across the world. Along with an evening protest to “Take Back the Night” and “reclaim the streets from harassment women face”, every year the feminist activists disperse in groups throughout Lebanon to gather societal perspectives from women on challenges they face as women and the changes they would like to see in Lebanon in regards to the social and political status of women. According to members of the collective, the objective of Nasawiya’s demonstration is:

1. For us, as feminists, to listen, grow and learn from what women have to say.
2. To let the women we meet express themselves, think about the questions, voice their opinions, concerns, and stories.
3. To let women know that our collective is out there and is supporting them and that they are welcome to join us and work with us (Nasawiya, 2011).

IWD is an opportunity for the collective to publish independent reports on women’s opinions of their status as citizens in Lebanon. USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA, SUCH AS Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and web spaces supply the means to disseminate their data on women’s status in Lebanon. IWD in Lebanon has become a popular occasion amongst women’s advocacy groups. Although IWD is not a formal or mandated national day in Lebanon, commemoration among women’s advocacy groups has become informally institutionalized at university campuses, through the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) and in civil society, and across media outlets. Yet, IWD celebrations in Lebanon are varied across the women’s movement. From a distance, the attention IWD has received in Lebanon since 1998 shows that women seem to be celebrated and met with sincere acclamation each year. However, there is a clear discrepancy between how IWD is commemorated among women’s advocacy groups. For Nasawiya, IWD serves as an opportunity to protest grievances and demand action from decision makers.
to recognize the plight of women in Lebanon. This is in stark contrast to how other women’s organizations or advocacy groups have utilized IWD as a day to promote superficial or hollow advancements for women in Lebanon.

As of 2012, Beirut’s Feminist Collective became known as Nasawiya (i.e. feminism in Arabic). Since its inception in 2010, Nasawiya has grown in membership and in the number of campaigns it engages in. The feminist collective consists of 270 independent activists, and though it began with one campaign for gender-awareness training in 2010, members now work on ten initiatives produced in or around Nasawiya. The collective, however, did not emerge without tribulations. Moawad describes the movement to have begun with Banat Akhir Zaman as:

[A] first attempt at young feminist organizing. [However,] it did not follow through and died out, then [be]came The Feminist Collective and then that became Nasawiya, the final functioning version. (N. Moawad, Personal Communication, September 03, 2012)

Although its origin in Beirut remains a perennial feature, some campaigns by Nasawiya cover the MENA region in solidarity with other Arab feminist movements for gender justice and equality. Furthermore, Nasawiya serves as a headquarter for expansive global networks in campaigns such as the Coalition for Sexual Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR). Along with the growth in its membership, the collective has taken on the role of an umbrella support for any feminist campaign in Lebanon. Thus, members of Nasawiya provide ancillary grassroots activism for both international campaigns and national campaigns for the women’s movement. The collective’s work is not restricted to any single partnership, institution, or organization, but rather serves as an alternative hub for using social and political issues as opportunities for organizing grassroots activities and services. As a transnational movement from below, Nasawiya works horizontally with national civil society institutions, namely KAFA and CRTD-A to organize grassroots campaigns, demonstrations, and protests.

Part of what makes Nasawiya a unique collective of activists among Lebanon’s women’s advocacy groups is the movement’s outspoken framing of resistance against the hegemony of the state and international order. This article argues that the reordering of the women’s advocacy community under a UNFPA-NCLW partnership has only led to a cosmetic improvement in the women’s movement, despite the multi-year and million-dollar UNFPA sponsorship. The NCLW’s inherent alignment with the state, with the first ladies of the sectarian government (wives of the president, prime minister, and speaker of the house) serving as NCLW leaders, clearly depicts the limitations of the mainstream women’s movement.

The goals and values of Nasawiya elaborate on activists’ efforts to raise consciousness among women and refute the strategies adopted by the mainstream women’s movement. The collective’s objectives are intimately intertwined within the declaration of their value system, wherein:

- Sexism, which is a devastating result of the feudal/patriarchal culture that we live in, is a major social problem that we should work to eradicate, especially since it is deeply
related to other social problems, such as classism, heterosexism, capitalism, racism, sectarianism, etc. Therefore, we must fight all forms of violence, discrimination, and exploitation that are based on gender, sexuality, able-bodied, ethnicity, race, religion, class, etc.

- As women, we have the right to a positive self-image and an emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy life.
- As women, we have the right to our bodies and our sexualities. In other words, women should be free to express their sexuality, free to make a choice about engaging or not engaging in sexual acts and/or relationships, free to choose whether they want to marry or not, whether they want to undergo an abortion or not. Women must also have easier access to helpful and non-judgmental sexual health services, as well as sexual education.
- We must work to eliminate all forms of harassment, and all forms of gender-based violence, verbal, physical, and sexual, wherever they happen.
- All women should have equal rights of employment, and equal treatment and pay in the workplace.
- Women should be encouraged to enter the fields of study and work that are currently dominated by men, such as sciences, sports, etc.
- Domestic migrant workers are employees and should have all the rights of employment, starting with respect and equality.
- We have a responsibility to be smart consumers since what we buy and where we buy from are political as well as personal choices that affect us all.
- We should encourage women to start women-friendly, workers-friendly and environmentally friendly small businesses. Women must play an active role in the political process, and lead the way in political reform.
- Women must have all their citizenship rights.
- Women must assume more leadership roles, in the private and public spheres, to reflect their central role in their communities.
- We have to promote feminist art, women-friendly media, and women’s studies courses and institutes.
- We should respect our natural environment, as [the] exploitation of nature is parallel to the exploitation of women.
- We should support other feminists in the Arab world, the global south, and the rest of the world, who are working towards a similar vision of a better world. (Nasawiya, Our Values. n.d.)

The collective implicitly differentiates itself from its fellow women’s advocacy groups. In promoting awareness, Nasawiya’s campaigns call for community accountability in lieu of legal frameworks for government accountability, especially in cases of sexual harassment. In a general sense, community accountability requires the commitment of activists and community members to share their common grievances:

This change in ourselves and in our communities is first and foremost one of healing, of openly talking about the multiple sources of our pain — our personal and collective histories, in non-judgmental, women-friendly environments, and then working together to eliminate these problems.
In promoting a culture of community accountability, Nasawiya’s objective is to expose the nuances in Lebanon’s social and political culture which enable oppression against women and men. The value system of feminism thus serves as a foundation for a critical framework in activism. In the context of Lebanon, this movement begins at the most rudimentary level of social oppression to address pervasive cultural taboos or topics considered shameful or ‘ayb. In an interview with a national newspaper, Nadine Moawad explains how a feminist movement could get women to challenge various social taboos surrounding the issue of women’s lack of empowerment:

In addition to the political sphere, society is also a front in the struggle for gender justice in Lebanon... Lebanese women are inundated with expectations of the female body that adhere to certain beauty norms: blonde, straight hair; small, neat noses; large lips and flat stomachs. Under the weight of tremendous social pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, women suffer huge damage to their self-esteem. This is exacerbated... by the complete lack of discussion around these issues... [Re-engaging debates on women’s issues in Lebanon] can be achieved... by spreading awareness and promoting debate about sexual health, sexual education in schools and sexual harassment. Through opening up a dialogue around these focal issues [Nasawiya] hopes to encourage women to be more aware of the various forces at play in determining gender norms and expectations. In turn... such a dialogue will enable women to explore different ways in which they can reassert their agency in order to bring about positive change in their lives... On the other hand... the problem of political disempowerment among women in Lebanon continues. Yet along with the empowerment of women in politics per se, the mainstreaming of core feminist values such as equality, solidarity and critical engagement with multi-faceted mechanisms of oppression is the key to breaking away from the endless cycles of sectarian squabbling that continue to mire Lebanese society. (Goodman, 2009)

Regarding its organizational structure, anyone is welcome to join Nasawiya as long as they are self-identified feminist activists and uphold the collective’s qiyamouna, or value system. The structure of the collective does not rest upon a formal organizational approach, but is driven by a loose, network-like structure. Castells (2000) proposed a new sociological conception of a network society, an evolved form of social organizing, wherein:

A social structure made up of networks is an interactive system, constantly on the move. Social actors constituted as networks add and subtract components, which bring into the acting network new values and interests defined in terms of their matrix in changing social structure. Structure makes practices, and practices enact and change structures following the same networking logic and dealing in similar terms with the programming and reprogramming of networks’ goals, by setting up these goals on the basis of cultural codes. (p. 697)

The collective maintains its cohesive movement through volunteerism and self-initiated campaigns or ‘initiatives’. As one member describes the collective: “There is no hierarchy. We have one coordinator for every initiative. Everyone has the right to start

4. “By activists, we mean individuals actually involved in gender justice work. Some Nasawiyas work full-time in women's rights; others volunteer a few hours a month. Some are students and some are professionals in different fields. All of us are activists in different capacities, whether by leading our own feminist projects or by discussing gender with our friends and communities. In our jobs, classes, homes, and daily lives, we advocate for equality and social change” (Nasawiyas, Who are Nasawiyas?, n.d.).
up a new initiative, as long as it has a strong feminist perspective and corresponds to our core values” (Sidiroupoulo, 2012). Members often work on more than one social issue at a time. Abandoning any formal structural organizing is an exercise in sustaining a communal movement based on inclusivity and will:

At Nasawiya, we do not have a traditional NGO structure of boards, staff, and volunteers. We are a member-driven collective where everyone is equal and in support of each other’s activism. We believe that we are stronger together. (Nasawiyas, Who are Nasawiyas?, n.d.)

It is not atypical to find activists in Nasawiya who were once part of formal non-governmental organizations and more traditional women’s advocacy groups. An activist at Nasawiya and a previous member of a well-known formal women’s advocacy group describes the contrast between activism and NGO work in women’s advocacy groups:

My own observations as an activist and a former NGO worker made me reach the conclusion that informal organizations that are less professionalized, are more flexible and can adapt more easily. Networks and collectives also leave the door open for creative, dynamic initiatives that will be sustained by the commitment of the activists rather than by grants. Nasawiya is a loose organization within the women’s movement that had made the conscious choice to avoid ‘NGOization’ and professionalization in order to allow the maximum of independence [for] its members within their initiative, thus enabling a wider independence for the organization as a whole. Talking with other Lebanese activists, it has become very clear that many of them working in more professionalized structures struggle with the issue of resources: they loathe the competition donor funding creates between organizations (who they would tend to see as natural partners in ideology but who become rivals when it comes to access to resources), they have issues with the agenda-bending that donor trends entail, often estimate the system of donor funding [to be] unsustainable and almost all of them draw a line to what kind of funding they’re ready to accept. (Daher, 2011)

Nasawiya reemerged from an unsuccessful campaign for bodily rights and sexuality awareness to eventually flourish into a burgeoning feminist movement when the women’s movement needed a renewed impetus for change. Initially, the collective’s expansion came with an influx of young activists seeking to join a movement with a consistent outward focus on progressive change. The collective structure of Nasawiya seems to appeal to young activists who experienced working under the restrictions of organized, professionalized, and institutionalized work in Lebanon’s women’s advocacy groups. Part of this impression is directly related to the friction and rigidity between donors’ agendas and pressure on grantee partners to meet expected criteria for campaigns and activities. The appeal of flexibility, creativity, and dynamism in a social movement is theoretically an attractive setting for a feminist collective of activists seeking to challenge the very organizational structures that have done little to mobilize an effective constituency for women’s rights in Lebanon.
Activists at Nasawiya are typically between 18–30 years of age and consist of women and men of various demographic backgrounds in Lebanon. However, as a social movement, Nasawiya often collaborates in protests, campaigns, conferences, and demonstrations with various groups and organizations that aim to further causes through a feminist perspective. The notable attraction between Nasawiya and young feminist activists in Lebanon is an indication for the need of positions that support the emergence of young leaders. Khattab (2010) characterizes the women’s movement as previously being an inopportune environment for fresh activism, where even leftist women’s advocacy groups were not particularly interested in mobilizing young people in Lebanon:

Despite the fact that these associations advanced reformist agendas and challenged the sectarian status quo, their institutional makeup failed to attract young leaders in the post-war period. In particular, they were increasingly controlled by a group of women who were involved in every aspect of the associational work but refused to delegate power to the newer generation (Khattab, 2010, p. 105).

In comparison to the institutional makeup of other women’s advocacy groups, the collective’s organizational structure relies on support and leadership by every member to sustain its flexible, creative, and dynamic work. Most importantly, Nasawiya is effective in mobilizing activists around new ideas in campaigns and initiatives by young people in Lebanon as a result of receiving funds and grants from women’s transnational organizations that support the establishment of local feminist movements. Commonly referred to by scholars of social movement theory and organizational theory as social movement organizations [SMO], these transnational organizations provide seed grants to diffuse a template of activism. Before Nasawiya, in 2008, 18.6 percent of reported organizations in the region worked with young women on women’s rights work. Those organizations that reported a target group of young women under thirty-years of age were most cognizant of the need to integrate young women’s rights work into their context. Yet, of the surveyed organizations, only 49 percent, less than half, admitted to having young women in managerial roles.

To build upon its twenty-one feminist causes and initiate such a challenge to the status quo, Nasawiya members engage in women’s issues across the following initiatives: Ghayreh 'ad tik: Feminist Tools for Change, Sawt Al Niswa, Adventures of Salwa, Take Back the Tech, coalitions with KAFA (to support the Law to Protect Women from Family Violence) and Zolah (to promote an Arab network of young feminist activists in the MENA region), The Gender Databank, International Women’s Day, Labor Day, Anti-Racism Movement, Delete Article 522 campaign, and most recently the Nasawiya Café, an entrepreneurial feminist venture to provide a sustainable income for campaigns while reclaiming a space in Beirut for feminist activists to congregate. In my view, each initiative varies in transnational ties, but ultimately contributes to disseminating transnational feminism.

The Pitfalls of Externalization: The International is Personal
Nasawiya is not exceptional in that the collective requires external funding, just like other women’s advocacy groups in Lebanon do. Similarly, as mainstream women’s
advocacy groups have been affected by transnational politics and institutional structures, transnational processes have also affected Nasawiya as a movement. The phenomenon of transnational activism in Nasawiya emerged with the influx of external interest to fund young women’s rights movement. The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), MamaCash, and the Global Women’s Fund (GWF) are prominent supporters for multi-year initiatives. Multi-year financial support through transnational feminist SMOs allowed for the transnational diffusion of resources, whether of funding or mobilization structures, for young feminist movements in developing countries. In Lebanon, the LBQT community became the source of feminist diffusion amongst young activists. LBQT support group Meem brought forth a renewed movement for queer and feminist discourse amongst young people and initiated campaigns for raising awareness on women’s rights in Lebanon, their lack of rights, and the imposed traditional, often patriarchal ideals that often give false notions of liberties, such as the means to drive, the wearing of revealing clothes, and attending public spaces along with male counterparts. Much of these awareness campaigns have been made possible through funding support from external organizations for feminist movement building and with the use of the Internet for organizing and disseminating information on activities occurring at grassroots level. Nasawiya’s transnational structure is heavily maintained and connected through the Internet and social media sites.

Nasawiya: A Model for Transnational Feminism
If Nasawiya has proven itself as a social movement, the feminist collective has proven to be a resistance movement against the patriarchal and sectarian political system in Lebanon. Its transnational features are broad, varied, and carry the seeds of becoming a model across the MENA region’s women’s movements. As a Lebanese feminist activist and coordinator of Nasawiya explains:

We understand the fact that many problems are Lebanon-specific, but many problems are common to the region. We, as Arab women, face challenges that have the same root, and this is why, early this year, many of our members in their individual capacity were part of the launching of the Young Arab Feminist Network in Cairo. We don’t like how the situation for women in Lebanon is always compared to that of women in Saudi Arabia, supposedly saying that women here are much better off when they are not even aware of what is happening. So yes, we focus on Lebanon, but at the same time, women in other countries are inspired by our work and have contacted us. There is a mutual inspiration between women here and those in the rest of the region. (Sara, 2010)

Years after its inception, Nasawiya continues to be a grouping of activists who have experience in feminist activism, yet face the challenge of mobilizing and organizing a movement as pronounced as their rhetoric. Surely, activists of Nasawiya have experienced personal backlashes in organizing within communities that do not uphold feminist values as a social framework (such as the very public sexual harassment offenses within the LGBTIQI community). However, there is a great consequence to cultivating an impenetrable community within a feminist bubble. Feminism, just as the women’s movement as a whole, has not generated any historical or sweeping
achievements in Lebanon. Furthermore, feminism popularly carries negative connotations for being a ‘Western’ product, irrelevant or inapplicable, and a radical paradigm for human rights to which is still a conservative and traditional society. In Lebanon, the feminist movement needs to address the bulwarks in society and family life by moving from the realm of the Internet to work more on the ground in order to create a lasting movement and achieve success.

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References


Rauda Morcos is a Palestinian activist who was publically outed in 2003 when Morcos agreed to be interviewed for *Yediot Ahronot*. Although Morcos asked that her sexual orientation not be made a subject of or an issue in the article, the journalist referred to her as a “lesbian” in the story’s bold letter headline and included a large photograph of her. As a result, in the span of a few days there was literally no one among Israel’s Palestinian population who did not know who Morcos was or that she was a lesbian. Of course, the newspaper’s contempt for Morcos’s insistence on restoring to herself an erased Palestinian indigeneity meant that outing her was an act of malevolence intended to cause her harm within communities that are perceived to be monolithically homophobic. As a result of being outed as a lesbian, Morcos was repeatedly harassed, physically assaulted, and had her car vandalized so many times that her local mechanic and smash repairer in Kufur Yassif stopped charging her for fixing it. She also lost her livelihood and position as an educator due to her refusal to deny her sexual orientation once it became public. During this time and for the following five years, Morcos became the face and voice for Aswat, a Haifa-based group for Palestinian gay women, which was then the only group of its kind in the Arab region.

In 2006 Morcos was awarded the Felipa De Souza award by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in recognition of the important role she plays in LGBTIQ rights activism. Morcos has acted as a board member and international advisor for numerous women’s and human rights organizations, including the Urgent Action Fund (U.S.A.), Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice (U.S.A.), The Global Alliance for LGBTIQ Education (Netherlands), Mama Cash (Netherlands), The Coalition of Women for Peace (Israel), The Global Fund for Women (U.S.A.), the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), The Association for Women’s Rights in Development, the International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organizing, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), the Women Human Rights Defenders Network and Human Rights Watch. She is currently acting as a regional LGBTIQ organizer for the Middle East and North Africa region. She also works as a freelancer with Hivos (Netherlands). In addition to organizing and advocating for human rights, Morcos is studying law at the Carmel Academic Center in Haifa.

Samar Habib and Nayla Moujaes: How did you become an activist? First for Palestinian rights and then for queer Palestinian rights?

Rauda Morcos: Maybe I was an activist all my life. I don’t know what the word “activist” means exactly, for me it’s about social development. I imagine that the environment I was born in compelled me to be an activist. I don’t understand how people cannot be. By contrast, I don’t judge any Palestinian living inside the 1948 borders who doesn’t want to be involved politically. Social and psychological pressures are immense, and even when they are subtle and discreet, they can force people to conceal their principles and to give up. Let me give you an example: There are Palestinian people inside the
'48 borders who are active politically, advocating for human rights, the rights of minorities and the right of return, but these people are faced with many obstacles. They face obstacles at school or university or when seeking employment. So, there are a lot of Palestinians inside Israel for whom Palestine is over and I do understand them, I understand that they feel a sense of hopelessness in relation to the Palestine issue generally, and may be experiencing hopelessness in relation to their own lives more specifically.

As for me, maybe I got my activism from my grandmother, may the Goddesses rest her soul. My grandmother lived most of her life in domestic spaces, raising children. She lived the Nakba more than once, and she was maybe not an activist in a traditional sense but she was aware of the occupation and military rule. Having been a widow with several children for whom she needed to secure a livelihood, she used to tell us all these stories but she never came up to me and said “go and resist Israel”. For me though, I acquired a political consciousness from an early age, as a result of my relationship with her. And I realized that the Palestinian flag needed to be hoisted. When I was a child it was forbidden for us to carry a Palestinian flag inside Israel, but nowadays these limitations don’t exist. When we were children we weren’t even allowed to say the word “Palestine” at school. At school we would be forced to celebrate Israeli Independence Day. Many of the teachers though would say to us “we are supposed to teach you specific material but we are not going to”. In fact, we had this one [Palestinian] teacher who told us the story of the Nakba in detail. Had anyone gone and told the authorities about him, he would have surely been sacked from the school. Fortunately, however, we were a close-knit group. But if anyone had known that he even brought us a guest speaker from our village, an eyewitness who knew stories that I think the whole world doesn’t know about, the kind of insider knowledge that only those inside the 1948 borders would know, he would have been punished for it, for sure.

My primary activism is that I want to say the word “Palestine” without being afraid of anyone. Secondly, at some stage, you start to grow up inside a problematic society, a society that is patriarchal in the first degree. And it’s not just that the Palestinian society is this way of its own accord; it is also a society which exists within a state which was forced upon the population, and so we have the feeling that we have to prove ourselves. The expectation is that you grow up, get an education, get married, and have children. My personal activism was that I didn’t want to be that person; I didn’t want to follow that order!

S.H. & N.M.: What do you see as overlaps between Palestinian identities and rights and queer ones?

R.M.: First of all, I think that terms like “Palestinian” or “Queer” or anything like that are things that construct us, they confine us, but they are also necessary. I think the Palestinian identity and the Queer identity converge in being both marginalized and they are both about resisting oppression. For me personally, I am an advocate of our rights as human beings first. Everything else may follow from that. I care about the struggle of disabled people in society as much as I care about women’s rights or Palestinian rights for example. These are all linked and have the same sources of oppression. Between you and me, I wish I didn’t have to be nationalistic, I am not a fan of nationalism. If circumstances were not what they are I would never use terms such as “Palestinian” or “Queer” to describe myself, but rather “human”. But, we live in a society which necessitates the use of these terms, because without them, it might be even harder to resist, and then you are silenced.

S.H. & N.M.: There’s a lot of talk about how International NGOs in the USA, the UK, and the Netherlands, who are possibly well-meaning, potentially make things worse for queers of the Arab region by not approaching the issues from a culturally sensitive perspective. Can you tell us how your experience working with different West-based NGOs has been, and assess for us how much these NGOs help and how much they hinder the process of achieving queer rights and respectability in the region?
R.M.: Yes, this is a critique often associated with Joseph Massad. I tend to agree with Massad on the issue that there are some international LGBTIQ organizations that have a missionary approach. These organizations can do more damage than good, because they think they have the recipe for success and want to see this same recipe implemented in the same way across very different contexts, and of course what works in one place may not work at all in another. But I think Massad misses something in his critique. You know, as we speak, I happen to be in Spain and just yesterday I was in a transgender march against transphobia. I was surrounded by non-Arabs, mostly Westerners and I did not feel at all alienated, or that this struggle was not somehow confluent with our own in our region, or that these people would not be able to understand what we were going through. I think this is what Massad forgets. And the approach to LGBTIQ rights activism in the Arab world or anywhere differs from organization to organization, from one activist to another. Even the Arab world itself is not monolithic and different national contexts require different approaches.

I also don’t think that just because I am an Arab I am automatically able to understand the experience of another Arab from our vast region. Frankly, as a Palestinian I find myself relating better to Chicana women and other indigenous peoples than some Egyptian people. I find more in common between myself and an Amazigh activist than I do with the Lebanese or Jordanian activists I come into contact with. To me, I see Lebanese activists as related to me through a common language, not much more.² So, there is a lot of complexity here that, I think, Massad misses. These are the people and organizations he misses in his critique. The interrelation I have as a Palestinian with a native American, or a Chicana or an Australian Aboriginal is that of a people on whom a foreign rule was imposed and from whom the land was taken – whether we are talking about an Islamic imposition of the Eastern Empire in Africa or the British mandate in Palestine or the French mandate in Western Arabia, or what have you.

That said, I do think that sometimes missionary organizations do make things potentially worse for queers of the Arab world. Executions in Iran may be getting worse in a bid to resist the challenge and the international pressure mounted by organizations like ILGA and IGLHRC. Also, you have to take into account that some Arab activists think that the West is the solution. I don’t judge them, I think I need to cooperate with these people. There are women who came to Aswat who wouldn’t use the word “Palestine” and we had to accommodate them. I found that through their interactions with us, at some point their points of view began to change, and that I had an impact on them. So, yes, it is true that some Western organizations are trying to erase cultural variance and difference by selling a particular model, and there are Arabs who buy into this, but this is not the picture as a whole.

S.H.: With Helem and Meem in Lebanon, Aswat and al-Qaws in Palestine, Abu Nuwas for Algerian LGBTIQs, Bedaya for Sudanese LGBTIQs, and many other similar organizations springing up, I wanted to ask you about the differences you see between these and international NGOs. Do you think these grassroots organizations are more effective than international NGOs or are they mimicking the missionary recipe you discussed above, as Massad would argue?

R.M.: The thing that really excites me about these grassroots organizations is that they operate very dissimilarly from each other, each of them is following its own recipe. Sometimes there are overlaps and similarities, but how might these overlaps occur? Let me give you an example. In Lebanon there is a law against homosexuality and this law was copied from the French during the French mandate. You will find that this is very similar to the laws that are found in Algeria, for the same reason. By the same token, when we look at countries that were under a British mandate, like Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) and Egypt, you will find that there were no specific laws against homosexuals. There are some vague laws that can be applied but nothing specific. There are some cultural similarities between the Palestinian and the Lebanese contexts, even if the origins of the legal systems are different. The Palestinian
Authority tried to introduce secular laws, and so did Lebanon, despite its multi-confessional nature. The Palestinian context is also similar to the Lebanese context for another reason: the feminist movements began in those countries at roughly the same time in the 80s. Our queer movement didn’t come from nowhere, there was fertile ground for us to emerge from social contexts suitable for us.

I don’t believe, if you are going to compare us to the West and claim that NGOism is a Western thing, that you would be right. Philanthropic organizing is not a Western invention, it is quite ancient. In the Islamic world it was and is known as “zakat”, where you are supposed to support social development. So this isn’t exactly a Western thing. If I were to criticize the West for its missionary impulse, I should do the same about the Islamic empire and what it did in Arab lands [S.H.: and Africa and Asia]... exactly.

I think Joseph Massad in his critique gives the West a kind of a status above the Arab world. The West has been liberated but we shouldn’t or even couldn’t. His criticism of the queers of the Middle East tends to hold us at a lower level, as though we are just mimicking the West. I say no, we are who we are, and we choose our own struggle, and make our own decisions. The language we use is our language, and if we are going to translate any terms or theories, this is our right, and we choose our own way and make our own decisions and struggles.

S.H. & N.M.: The internet has been a site for some serious social change in the past two decades. People who are concerned about anonymity, who in a pre-internet world might not have had access to others like them, can now exist in a virtual place where they can feel safe but also connect. I wonder if you can talk to us a little bit about the way lesbian activists in our region have utilized the internet to carry out cyber activism. For example, we know that most of the members of official lesbian organizations are not out, and yet they are also very active.

R.M.: The very first group of women I met, who were also Arab and lesbian, lived in a neighboring Arab country (for security reasons I can’t tell you where). How we met had a lot to do with the internet. I had written an article under a pseudonym talking about being a Palestinian lesbian and imagining a queer Palestinian state and asking where all the other Arab lesbians are. A woman in this neighboring country found it and translated it and asked my publisher, who was a Jewish Israeli woman, how she could get in contact with me. We corresponded by phone, I didn’t have an email account back then, but in this city to which I was invited there was a gay friendly internet cafe. It was the first time I saw an Arab world that looked like a gay oasis to me, but we are talking about a middle-upper class culture here, and I was from the middle-lower class so it was a cultural shock. So I was invited to lunch at this woman’s house and her mother was asking me “do your parents know you are a lesbian?” and I was shocked by how accepted she was at home. She even lived on her own and had daily visitors. We became friends and I met her community of friends as well. After I left I knew I wanted something like this in Palestine, to create our own community. It was clear to me that because we didn’t have a big Arab city inside the 1948 borders that the organizing was going to be different. I started to research where I might be able to find women like myself. I tried local Jewish NGOs. Shortly after, Black Laundry – an Israeli Jewish gay group against occupation – was set-up, so I went to them and found out about Samira. I looked for her and found out that apparently she had been looking for me too, because I was very out and had a reputation. Eventually, a Canadian woman who knew both of us put us in touch and we met. We discussed that we needed to create some kind of group for Palestinian lesbians and that we would have to find them. So we started to look and if you seek you find. Even though neither Samira nor I were internet savvy, the two Palestinian women we met, Dayna and Reem, were both thinking of creating an email list for gay Palestinian women. At that time I had found out about some internet Arab lesbian websites like Bint el-Nas, ‘Assal and an international email list, through a contact in Jordan, but we also wanted to reach people who weren’t privileged. There are a lot of women in
Aswat, for example, who don’t have an email account and don’t use computers. But cyberspace remains extremely important because it creates links not just among LGBTIQ people, but with non-LGBTIQ people, people internationally, from different backgrounds. At a local level, cyberspace is important but it is not the most important, but in terms of regional efforts this is where it becomes essential in building networks.

S.H.: Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, we’ve noticed that not only voices for democratic change are now being heard, but we’ve also seen how the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamists in Morocco have spoken up about changing the constitution to specifically state that marriage is between a man and woman to the exclusion of others, and this is something that is unprecedented. This is the type of constitutional change that we saw in the U.S.A. when George W. Bush introduced the Defense of Marriage Act. We also saw an equivalent legislative change under the Howard government in Australia. So, it’s interesting to see that the Arab Spring brings both a threat of further enmeshing homophobia in legal codes and the promise of civic pluralism. What is the significance in your opinion of the current revolutions in the MENA for LGBTIQ rights? Will they provide an opportunity for the type of social change required, from the ground up, to officially create a safe space for queers residing within Arab states?

R.M.: You know, we started [LGBTIQ activism] before the Arab Spring. I think there is something in the region that is allowing these changes to occur. I give all the credit to civil society because I know that local organizations in all the countries did a lot of groundwork to facilitate these events. I do not deny that there is credit due to all facets of civil society, including the queer movement and the feminist and human rights groups... all of these have been facilitating this change for a period of time, and so I wasn’t surprised to see what happened, it was the time for it. It is my dream that we don’t repeat our mistakes. I wish these revolutions will take people to a place where they realize that patriarchy proved its failure, so let’s make something new. But that’s what’s still missing. We are still focused on male leaders, unfortunately. Let me give you an example. When Mahmood Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority (P.A.), delivered a speech about the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations in September, who wrote his speech? It seemed to me that Hanan Ashrawi wrote a great part of his speech. So, ok he’s a big leader, but it was clear that this was Hanan Ashrawi’s thinking and writing style. She would completely overshadow him if she had been the leader of the P.A. So all these systems we have that center around the leader, the president or the king, are inadequate and I am against that. Can’t we find an alternative form of government? Why not have more than one leader? Why don’t we operate as a collective? The queer communities in the region operate in this way and we might play a big part in the construction of this alternative society, at least I hope so.

S.H.: Do you think these revolutions are in a sense revolutions against patriarchy?

R.M.: I see them as revolutions against the system, but I don’t think patriarchy has yet been challenged.

S.H.: Yes, I was thinking about what happened specifically to a group of feminist protestors in Egypt who were incarcerated by the Egyptian military and had virginity tests administered on them publically. I mean, this kind of humiliation is very specifically targeted against the woman’s body and implies that virginity is synonymous with honor, which is a patriarchal notion of ownership of women’s sexualities and bodies. In this instance, the revolutionaries were betrayed by a purportedly interim regime that was supposed to have replaced the overthrown president.

S.H. & N.M.: Do you envision a queer-friendly Arab state in our lifetime? Where might it be? And if not, can you just fantasize for us what such a thing would look like? And how important is such an achievement to the queers of the MENA?

R.M.: Personally, I’m optimistic and I don’t think anything is impossible. It depends on what you wish for. I wish to have a queer-friendly country, and
my wish will come true if I work toward this goal. I think all Arab countries today have the potential to be queer-friendly. The matter is not related to the government, it depends on us [queers]. If we want the government to be queer-friendly, and if we work toward achieving this task, which is not an easy one, we can attain it. It is our decision. I think we are on our way. I even think that Palestine is ready to be queer-friendly, not because of Western pressure but because the queers in Palestine are working against occupation and they are proving to their community and society that they are part of this nation, and that they are not outsiders. I know from my experience in Aswat that when we used to say we were “Palestinian gay women”, some non-queer Palestinian groups used to find this bothersome. They used to say to us: “What business do you have with the Palestinian struggle? You are lesbians and that’s it”. But we always insisted that Palestine is part of our struggle and we would not deny our Palestinian identity. In fact, you can’t really effectively work on your queer identity without knowing that it is part of your larger struggle as a Palestinian. After some time, and after a lot of work we were able to link these two struggles. When groups wanted to release statements against the Israeli occupation or oppression, or to sign petitions, even in the media, we found that we were being asked to join our voices to their voices. This is a big step for us and for the Palestinian society at large, because the Palestinian society needs to be aware of all of its constituent parts. And the question is: how do we as local groups use this change and mobilize it to our advantage?

S.H. & N.M.: There has been a lot of diplomatic and tactical effort on the part of the Israeli state to mobilize its greater acceptance of Israeli queers as a kind of a trump card to “pinkwash” its violations of Palestinian human rights. In that context, what has your experience of Israeli NGOs been in relation to supporting Palestinian queers? To what extent are these NGOs outspoken about their government’s poor human rights record, and in what sense are they subsumed by its efforts at homonationalism?

R.M.: This is a big topic. This is a matter that has existed long before people became aware of it and long before the term “pinkwashing” emerged. This is the one thing that wherever you travel in the West everyone asks you about. Even when you say you are Palestinian in the West, someone is bound to stop you and say, “Ah, but in Israel there are queer groups and it is the only oasis in the Middle East”. But that’s not true, I don’t know what they are talking about when they say “oasis” or refer to “queer rights” in Israel. I know a little bit about law now and I know that the Israeli law is among the most developed in the world, but this doesn’t mean that it is applied in reality. In fact, the Haifa Forum is the only Israeli LGBTIQ group that still tries to address homophobia and transphobia. This suggests to me that these phobias still exist. There is homophobia, transphobia, and racism. Even the concept of democracy, while it exists as a concept, is not applied on the ground.

So this is an aspect of the “pinkwashing” that they do, that Israel is a nation of great kindness to LGBTIQ people.

S.H.: Yes, in fact, an article published on the news website Mako on September 19, 2011, indicated that the health ministry in Israel had just issued a directive to health service providers to de-list homosexuality as a disease. This seems very incongruent with the idea of the gay oasis, to be sure.

R.M.: When we in Aswat were talking about the oppression of Palestinians, the Agudah came out saying how they save Palestinian gay men and bring them to Israel. I once asked the directorship at Agudah: “Where are all these Palestinian gay men from the West Bank and Gaza that you are claiming to be saving?” I know it’s not easy to be gay in the West Bank, but it’s not easy being gay in Ghana either, or in the U.S.A. And it’s not easy to be gay in Israel (except in Tel Aviv). My struggle with Israeli LGBTIQ organizations is also around the issue of occupation. They are not willing to recognize the occupation. They can be gay and serve in the Israeli army. For me this is something that doesn’t make sense. How can you be queer and understand oppression and be aware of it and then also serve in the military? It’s in this context that Israeli LGBTIQ organizations began to plan
for hosting International World Pride (in 2006) at the same time that Israel was invading Lebanon and waging war in Gaza. Half the world can’t even enter Israel, because many countries have no diplomatic relations with the country, and yet they were still preparing for an International World Pride event. So what does “international” mean here? According to Israel, “international” means the first world. But for me, “international” means the whole world, not just the first world. We, Aswat and Helem, who were the only Arab LGBT organizations back then in 2006, wrote a boycott statement against the World Pride to be hosted in Israel. In this statement we said that Israel was attempting to hide its daily crimes in Palestine and Lebanon, and that it was also using the LGBTIQ struggle for rights to imply that only Israel in the MENA region had a democratic regime and that the surrounding Arab countries are dark and primitive in contrast. In this way, Israel was also trying to put pressure on different organizations around the world to support it in its so-called plight to save “democracy” and the projects they have to rescue the “poor” gay Palestinians who suffer in the West Bank and Gaza. Many groups around the world supported our statement and boycotted the International World Pride and the attempt of the Israelis to cover their massacres was quite unsuccessful.

S.H.: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today and for sharing your knowledge and insights with us. Is there anything else you want to add before we end this interview?

R.M.: Yes, I’d like to wrap this up with something I always say: Being a minority makes you a majority of the ones who are able to see the Other.

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ENDNOTES

1. Morcos uses the Arabic word "birakboona," which in Levant Arabic refers to tarkeeb, that is putting things together. No doubt she is referring to the social construction of identity.
2. Morcos is referring to the Levantine dialect spoken in Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Syria which differs substantially from other Arabic dialects such as those in Egypt and Sudan, North Africa or the Gulf.
3. The Arabic word “tawa’if” is translated as the more accurate “confessionalisms” and not “denominations”.
4. The Agudah is the National Association of LGBT in Israel.
5. Morcos invokes the racism inherent in colonial discourse, such as that produced in relation to Africa as the “dark continent”.
BECOMING*

I was born in 1982. Growing up in a Maronite family, I was a very religious teenager. I read the Bible three times a day. In the morning, I would read inspiring verses from the Psalms. After school, before doing my homework, I would read a passage from the Gospels, and before I went to bed, a passage from the Letters. I loved the Bible. It gave me strength, hope and joy. I wanted to be a missionary when I grew up, and even at a young age, I was a passionate preacher.

At the same time, I knew I was gay since I was six years old. Back then, I defined myself as different. I was a typical tomboy, always hanging out with boys, making fun of girls, cutting my hair really short, and refusing to wear a fostan or a skarbeeni.¹ I told people to call me “Paul” (like the Apostle) and they did. As a kid, it was never a problem. My parents loved me, my friends loved me, and I did great at school. I played the piano, I played a lot of sports, I wrote sappy poetry, I read 10 books a month, I told everyone that I had a crush on this girl or that girl, and everybody thought it was cute. And my favorite thing in the world for seven years was Girl Scouts. I went camping every chance I could, putting more effort into scouting than I did anywhere else. My homosexuality, although I didn’t have a name for it, never seemed unnatural to me. It was the most natural, most normal part of my being.

Then came that summer between Grade 6 and Grade 7, where all the girls suddenly return to school wearing bras, legs waxed, eyebrows plucked, and all the boys come back to school taller, with deeper voices and facial hair. Suddenly, it was no longer about girls vs. boys. It was about girlfriends and boyfriends. My classmates changed. They started telling me that I should “ibtannat shwai”² and go out with a guy. I would laugh and call them ridiculous and say, “Aslan ana b7ibb il banet”.³ Some dismissed me as childish. My close friends were very respectful and accepting. They had known me most of my life, and they didn’t judge me. The only advice they gave me was to stop announcing it to people because it would cause me problems. Problems? I thought. Why would it be a problem? This is how I am. I honestly did not believe that homosexuality was a problem. It was just so natural to me and I was sure it wasn’t a problem.

But I took their advice and kept quiet about it. I didn’t change my looks or behaviors, however. I liked my boyish looks and clothes, and nobody around me seemed to have a problem with it. People mostly attributed it to my personality. “3am bitrakkiz 3a darsa ou 3al activities, ma bela bil msa7bi”.⁴ And I felt accepted.

As the months passed, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable in my surroundings. Parties were not fun anymore; they became about girls and boys flirting and making out. Events and special functions became about girls dressing up in fancy clothes and makeup. It became a battle for me to fit in. I grew sadder and less secure about myself. I was rejected as a freak by the girls I liked. My mother grew impatient with my tomboy phase. “Ma 7allik titghayyari?”⁵ she said. But she still loved me and did everything she could to make me happy.

Short Stories

She was an elementary teacher at the school I went to, and always took great pride in my scholastic achievements. My father lived and worked in the Gulf, and only came to spend a month with us every summer. My mom raised me and my sister by herself. I was the light of her life and I was extremely, incredibly attached to her.

Then, at 14, came the shock of my lifetime. During my daily Bible readings, I came across a passage in Romans 1, a passage that would haunt me for years:

> For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

> And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

I read and re-read the passage, hoping every time that I had misread something. But there it was, staring me in the face. I got my Arabic Bible and looked up the verses there and they said the same thing: God gave them up. “Aslamahom Allah”.

I was terrified and deeply ashamed. I was shocked by the idea that God had given me up because I loved women. How could that be? It didn’t make any sense. Why would God give me up? I was obsessed with the idea that I would receive “in [myself] the penalty of [my] error”. My life was doomed for misery, I thought. But what had I done that was so bad? How could I be wicked and covetous and malicious and murderous and evil-minded? I was none of these things. Could it be that I was fooling myself and that this was what God really thought of me?

I panicked. I cried. I could not pray. I hid my Bible away. I felt doomed. God had given up on me. For weeks, it was all I could think about, and inside me, I knew there must be a mistake. Something must be wrong. It was impossible that I was a bad person and that God wouldn’t love me. Why would the Bible say something so horrible?

A short while later, I received the answer to my torturous questions. By what I believed was God speaking to me, I came across an episode of the “Al-Shater Yi7ki” show on LBC with Dr. Ziad Njeim. It was about homosexuality. Gay men were sitting in the studio with masks on their faces or as shadows behind curtains. And guests included psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, and men of different religions. Most of the show was very negative, and the gay men guests were shouted at, called perverts and pedophiles, and mocked. And then one of the priests spoke. Through tears of joy, I heard him say that homosexuality was normal, and that Christianity was tolerant of gay people. He said the story of Soddom and Gomorrah was misinterpreted as anti-gay, but that it was really about a society that lived without laws, without humanity, without spirituality.

The other priest mocked him and said: “If you approve so much, why don’t you become homosexual yourself?!”

He replied, still smiling, “No, I cannot become homosexual, just like a homosexual cannot become heterosexual”. He was peaceful and calm and he changed my life. I was overcome with joy. I still wish today, 12 years after that episode, that I could find him and thank him and give him a big hug. I rushed to get my Bible and looked up the same passage again. Of course! I exclaimed. Of course God would not give me up! Of course I am not evil! I became happy and confident again. I was still
having a hard time fitting in with my school’s social setting, but I coped well, mostly using humor. I joked and laughed and studied and went camping. And I continued to read my Bible.

And then, when I was 16, I did the one thing that I would regret for the rest of my life. Naively and without thinking, I was talking to my good friend, the school’s Bible teacher, and I told him that I had struggled with my homosexuality and faith. His face turned white. “What?” he said. “Yes, but don’t worry”, I assured him. “I am fine now, I know that God loves me the way I am”. “What?” he said again, “what do you mean ‘the way I am’”? “I am a homosexual”, I said, wondering why he wasn’t congratulating me on my amazing achievement. “No”, he said, “homosexuals are sinners. God hates homosexuals”.

“No, He doesn’t”, I replied. He got up and paced around the room. He looked panicked, like he had suddenly been struck with a deadly disease. “No, no, no”, he kept saying. “Ma biseer, haydi mishkli kteer kbeeri. Get out of my office. Mamnou3 ba3a itji 3al Bible study”.6

“But… I can’t not come… I want to be a missionary”, I said. “Khalas! Tla3i la barra!”7 Within an hour, he had told the Principal, they supervisors, and the teachers. And if you remember, my mother was a teacher at my school. During the ride back home that day, she said nothing, not a word, but she had a horrible frown on her face. She wouldn’t even look at me. I understood immediately that the Bible teacher must have told her something and that it was going to be a big problem.

At home, I heated up a plate of spaghetti to have lunch in the kitchen, when my mother suddenly had a nervous breakdown. She started breaking plates and glasses on the floor, screaming “Keef bta3imli heik fyyi?? Mannik tabe3iyi… 3milit kill shee kirmelik… tlo3ti wi7di woskha!”8 My heart sank and I was shaking and tears ran down my face as I sat there motionless. Glassware was breaking around me and food was flying over my head. It was the first time in my life my mother yelled at me or called me names. “Oumi footi 3a oudtik!”9 she screamed, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me to my room. It was the first time in my life my mother physically hurt me. She banged the door shut and locked me in. For hours, I cried like I had never cried in my life. I could not stop crying. Through the door, I could hear her crying and screaming and breaking things.

How horrible, I thought, that I had humiliated her so terribly at school. How horrible I was. I felt like the biggest disappointment in the world.

In the evening, she barged through the door and dragged me into the bathroom. She had filled the tub with hot water and something – I don’t know what. She stripped me of my clothes and shoved me into the tub. “Fee shee mish tabe3i feeki, wi7di woskha, baddi in2a3ik hone la tondafi”.10 She locked the bathroom door and I sat in the tub, still crying, for three hours. Tash-sheit11 over the hours. I thought of drowning myself in the tub. I tried to hold my breath under the water, but I couldn’t. I wanted to die. My life was over, I thought. I wanted to die. My mother finally opened the door and told me to get out and go back into my room. She was calmer, but still angry and sad. She told me they had kicked me out of school, out of Bible study, out of Girl Scouts, out of the basketball team, out of everything, and that I would remain locked in my room forever.

For 12 days, I stayed in my room. My mother didn’t say a word to me. She would open the door only to drop in a Picon sandwich or to tell me to get into the tub again. I stayed in bed for 12 days, doing nothing but crying and eating Picon sandwiches. I was starving and weak. I think now that she must have thought something was physically wrong with me, and she thought she would treat it with the Picon sandwiches and hot baths. But I was never angry at her; I was angry at myself for hurting her so badly. During those two weeks, she took me to the family doctor for a medical checkup. “Shifli shou bihal binit, mareeda”,12 she said to him. He checked me and ran tests, and nothing out of the ordinary came out. She took me to a priest, who talked to me for an hour about masturbation and
drugs and the horrors of sex before marriage. She took me to an old man, who I think was a psychiatrist, who prescribed pills for me. I don’t know what they were, but I gained 30 kilograms over a couple of months. This whole time, I was like a zombie. I said nothing, I just stared blankly in front of me, and went wherever my mother took me.

On the 13th day, she woke me up at 7 a.m. and told me to get ready for school. “I don’t want to go”, I said. “Get up!” she screamed.

And so I went back to school. The first day was horrendous. They had placed my seat at the back of the classroom, away from everyone else. I was not allowed to interact with anyone. My classmates were baffled, but my friends had figured out what happened. In the playground, I was not allowed to sit with anyone. The supervisors were monitoring me and asked me to sit alone. My friends, of course, thought that was ridiculous and came and sat with me. They got yelled at but didn’t care. “They told us you were sick”, my friend said to me. “What happened? No one would tell us anything. We called you at home and your mom kept saying you were sleeping and asked us to stop calling”. I didn’t say anything. There were tears in my eyes. “We protested for days”, she told me. “We went down to the Principal’s office and demanded that we talk to you. He kept repeating that you were sick. What happened?”

“My mother hates me”, I said. They were silent and stopped pushing me for answers. “They can’t do this to you”, one of them said. “We will not allow it. What are they going to do? Expel all of us?” After recess, eight of my classmates moved their seats to the back of the class to sit beside me. The teacher complied. It was the first time I felt empowered by group support and solidarity. For the entirety of the school year, my friends’ love and compassion carried me through, as I faced mockery, disgust, verbal abuse, and physical violence from everybody around me.

I managed to get through graduation and make it to college. The years passed and my mother wouldn’t talk to me. I mean we spoke to each other, but we never really talked. As time passed, she got less angry and more sad. I’ve learned to cope with it and to forgive her for everything. I’ve learned that it was only out of love that she did what she did. I’ve learned that she was really worried about me being unhappy and dealing with society’s homophobia. I’ve learned that she has only ever loved me just the way I am. But the hardest thing to unlearn was the overwhelming feeling of disappointing those I loved. That stayed with me till this very day.

I’ve learned that organized religion only wants to control people, and that the only true message of any faith is love. No matter how much hatred people throw at you, you just say thank you and give back love. I’ve learned that with good friends by your side, you can overcome anything. Nine years after my friends stood up to the school’s administration to demand my right to equal treatment, I started a lesbian support group called Meem, based on the same principles of solidarity and friendship. And that little tomboy who wanted to be a missionary is now an activist for social justice. Every single day, I fight for peace, love, and gender equality. I grew up to be exactly what I always wanted to be.

ENDNOTES

* The numeral “3” is used to represent the Arabic letter ‘ayn and the numeral “7” is used to represent the Arabic letter ha. This “chat alphabet” is adopted when communicating in colloquial Arabic over the Internet.
1. Dress or girly shoes.
2. Act more like a girl.
3. Actually I like girls.
4. She is focused on her studies and activities. Relationships are the last thing on her mind.
5. Isn’t it about time you changed?
6. That’s impossible! This is a huge problem. You can’t come to Bible study anymore.
7. Enough! Get out of here!
8. How can you do that to me? You are not normal. I did everything for you. You turned out to be a bitch.
9. Go to your room.
10. There’s something abnormal in you, you dirty girl, I will soak you here till you’re clean.
11. My skin wrinkled up.
12. See what’s wrong with my daughter; she’s sick.
God’s Will

I was 17 when I came out to myself as a lesbian. I had always felt that there was something odd about my sexuality, but it wasn’t until I was 17 that I was able to tell myself: I am a lesbian. As soon as I came out to myself, I desperately wanted to come out to my mother. We were in Saudi Arabia at the time and I browsed through gay websites and wondered what my mother would say about them. We are very close, my mom and I. We never kept secrets from each other. I was always open and honest with her about everything. I never attempted to hide my boyish qualities or to tell her that I didn’t want to get married when I grew up.

I asked my friends for advice and everyone, without exception, said: Don’t tell your mom! They said it was too early for me, that I had barely just come out to myself, that she wouldn’t understand, that I should wait till I’m older, stronger, and wiser. But I couldn’t lie to her; it was too big a secret to keep. So only three weeks after I first came out to myself, I told my mother I was gay. I remember the situation very well. I was shaking with fear and I spoke quickly. To my surprise, my mother took the news very calmly. She listened to me closely and the first thing she said was: “Rabbaytik mnee7”. It sounded like half-way in between a question and a statement.

Then she asked me: “Do you seek female love because I didn’t love you enough? “ “Yih!” I said. “Of course not! On the contrary!” (My mother always spoiled me). We had a short but very heartfelt talk about my sexuality, and I was overwhelmingly grateful for her reaction. Her major concern was that I shouldn’t tell people – not because she was ashamed of it – but because she feared that they would hurt me. We come from a very small town in the North, so my mother worried that if I told one person, the entire town would find out, and she knew their reaction would not be so supportive.

My mother is a devout Muslim woman. Her belief in God is so powerful that she surrenders everything to His will. Anything that happens is because God wills it. And so she didn’t question or challenge my homosexuality. “Allah heik ketibli”, she said. She told me it made no sense for her to try to change God’s will. Shortly after, I told my father, and he had the same reaction: “We cannot change what is God’s will. If it is meant for you to change, you will change on your own”. This is an odd reaction for Muslim parents, who usually get scared of their children’s actions being sinful. Not my parents. When they thought about it and discussed the matter between themselves, they deduced that my living a lie was a bigger sin that my sexuality. They told me that it was better for me to be honest with myself and my parents than to be a hypocrite.

Both my parents worry about my future. Every once in a while, my dad asks my mom if I have changed. He worries about who would be there to support me when I am older. My mother always worries about society’s homophobia towards me. But my parent’s faith is the source of their compassion and unconditional love towards me and all of their children.

I consider myself a religious woman. I often hear a lot of criticism about being a veiled lesbian. Members of the gay community don’t quite understand: they think that homosexuality and religion are contradictory identities. But I am very comfortable with my faith, especially the faith that my parents have set as an example for me. At the end of the day, I am confident that God knows me and understands the deepest parts of me. People often think that Islam is the least tolerant of religions towards homosexuality. But that’s a sad misconception that has lately been enforced on us by all the Islamophobia from the West. Like all religions, Islamic faith is distorted by politics and social institutions, but the essence of it is about love, acceptance, and the value of each individual’s human dignity above everything else.

ENDNOTES

1. I raised you well.
2. This is what God has written for you.
This Land is not My Land

I realized I was queer when I was in college in Jordan, despite its very conservative environment. I was always attracted to women, but my first experience was in college when I fell in love with a woman while dating a guy. My boyfriend at the time found out and it created tons of problems which escalated into police being involved. I was forced to move back with my family the last year of college, and my mom caught me kissing a girl, but didn’t say a word. Later on, the girl’s mother contacted mine and told her we were having an unnatural relationship. My mother freaked out. We denied there was anything between us. That was when I got really scared and felt that I either had to leave Jordan or live a straight life.

And so I chose to escape. But to do that with my parents’ approval, it had to involve school. By 23, I had applied to different PhD programs in the US and I ended up in a very conservative state. I didn’t care where I went as long as I could leave. But that meant that I had to completely compartmentalize myself. In Jordan, I was the straight member of my big, traditional family. In the US, I was gay and on my own. But what I did not know at the time was that I was not ready for the white, Republican, straight Arabophobic, male-dominated mentality that I found myself facing in the US.

Suddenly, I became an Arab ambassador, enthusiastically answering all sorts of dumb questions on a daily basis. People were confused when they found out I was Arab, Christian, queer, and down with Islam. They found it odd that my family had never been oppressed by Muslims. Aren’t all Arabs Muslim and all Muslims terrorists? Turns out that being open about your identity is just as hard as being in the closet.

The hardest part was when my parents visited me a couple of months ago. It was the first time that I allowed both sides of me to meet each other. Of course, I de-gayed the house and my girlfriend became my best friend who lived with me in my one-bedroom apartment. They went back to Amman convinced that everything in my life was “normal” – according to their understanding.

I ran away from home looking for the freedom to do what I wanted without being judged, and by escaping, I chose to leave behind a big part of who I am. It remains heavy on my heart. I have never felt that this house is my home, or even that this stuff is my furniture. But if I could go back in time, I would do the same thing all over again, because I don’t think I am ready to merge my two lives in Jordan. If I didn’t leave, I would have never explored the different dimensions of who I was, I would have never questioned everything the way I was able to in the US.

But the gay community here is not the supportive, understanding community you’d think it would be. Some people are racist or Zionist. They can’t understand who I am or where I’m coming from. I cannot relate to anything with them other than sexual preference, which is not enough grounds for me to establish relationships with people. Being queer here is all about being proud and colorful. It’s one big party. In Jordan, you don’t talk about sexuality even if you’re straight. You are simply part of a community and you are modest about it. It’s all about being a part of the family and fitting in, which is not necessarily a good thing, but it’s our culture.

To me, being queer is not only about loving women, but also about being aware of my family and how they are feeling. Once I went to a group therapy session for gays and lesbians in the city, and one of the guys said to me after hearing my story: “Your family just needs to get over it. If they don’t like it, then fuck them. Just leave”. What an absurd piece of advice! It is not even an option for me to just leave my family. My world revolves around the well-being of my mother, my father and my siblings because I love them so much. When my family is happy, I am automatically happy. They have done so much for me that I can’t just say “yalla, bye” to them. This bond grows with age – it doesn’t just disappear.

I have been independent throughout my stay here and I thought it would help me be stronger. And it has. But it hasn’t helped me feel that I can come out.
to my family. I know my family loves me just the same, but I also know that if I told my mother, she would blame herself and that would kill me. She has given so much to me, to my brother and sister. When my brother got cancer, she blamed herself and her genes. She is ridiculous like that. I panic every time I think of coming out to her. The guilt would kill me, and my mother has done a great job – like all mothers do – of instilling guilt in her children.

I am always hoping to end up somewhere in the Middle East: find a job and “come back”. But I don’t think it will be Amman. I need a place that’s far enough from my family and close enough at the same time. Maybe Beirut, maybe Turkey, I’m not sure. But wherever you travel, wherever you escape to, there is always the burning desire to come back home.

My Hijab and I

I have a problem. I’ve always worn the hijab in a funny way. I’ve been wearing it for over 10 years now. The other day, my mom said, “You’re never going to know how to wear the hijab properly!” I grew up in a Shiite Muslim community in the South. All the girls and women in my family and my community are veiled. We were taught that something was wrong with non-hijab girls – that something was missing in their lives. We couldn’t say they were slutty because they included our cousins.

When I was nine, I really wanted to wear the hijab. I wanted to be a big girl, like all the women around me. My mom said I had to wait till puberty, when I would be about 13. She tried to distract me by offering me my usual short tomboyish haircut, something special that only I got. But I followed her around the house with a hijab until, finally, she caved in. In any case, I got my period when I was 10. So everybody won. 

I guess I started having a problem with it just before I came out to myself at age 14. Around that time, I began to discover the world outside the South of Lebanon. I was someone who always stayed home. I would go directly from home to school, and then from school to my room. I was molested around this time as well. I guess that was my way of dealing with it. In the summer, I didn’t go out either. And if I did go out, I didn’t stray further than the garden.

During that time, I just watched TV the whole time. That’s where I came into contact with the Western world. That’s when I started to hate my veil. I wanted to look like what I was seeing on the screen. At the same time, I was coming out to myself. I still had short hair. I started to really want to dress differently. I felt I didn’t fit in with everyone else. I refused to wear high heels. I wanted to be more of a tomboy. Since I was a kid, I was already a big tomboy. I would wear jeans and tennis shoes. I wore two shirts on top of each other and stuck my collar out. I would tuck my hijab into my shirt.

But it still wasn’t enough for me. I started blaming all my problems on my hijab. I thought it made me look “uncool”. I wanted to show off my short hair. I wanted to announce my “dykiness” or butchiness. I wanted to make my hair spiky. And I wanted to wear short sleeves in the summer, not the long sleeves you have to wear with the veil.

Mostly, I craved to send a signal out to other women that I was a dyke. With the hijab and its required clothing, I felt that was impossible. I really just hated it. It wasn’t the way I wanted to look. At some point, I started imitating my straight sister’s way of dressing: tight clothes, long skirts. Then I realized that this style was designed to attract men and I wasn’t comfortable with that. Other people thought it was very cool but I was attracting the wrong sex!

It was then that I switched to wearing really baggy clothes, like my mom does. And everybody protested about this. The whole family. They would say, “You’re still young, why do you want to dress twice your age? You should wear things that attract boys’ attention!” That’s when I became completely
convinced. In my mind, if I wasn’t attracting women, I didn’t want to attract anyone!

Then we moved to Beirut. And the second phase of my life started. I was 18. When I was at school, I would go to work and come back home right after. I didn’t meet any new people. Anyone I met, I met online. And that’s how I found two people in particular who really changed me: an American and a German. Both were lesbians. At no point did they ask to see a photo of me without my veil. I realized that these two people, living in the “cool” society that I wanted to live in, thought my hijab was cool. My American friend loved it. She would always compliment me in my hijab, as did my German friend. I reached a point in my life where I had to decide. Either I had to take off my hated veil or learn to love it. The easiest choice was to learn to love it. Taking my hijab of nine years off was out of the question. That would have been like ripping out a part of myself. It would have also caused a lot of problems with my family. And I didn’t want to deal with that. People would start to look at me differently as well. A girl who takes off her hijab is considered an even bigger sinner than the one who doesn’t wear one in the first place. At that age, I wasn’t ready to take it off and deal with all the repercussions. I didn’t have the weapons or the support. So I had to learn to love it.

I could see it in their eyes. I can count only four women who didn’t have a problem with me and my veil. I used to really lose my temper. Finally, I sat one of the girls down and explained to her that sexuality has nothing to do with a veil. It’s not like I suddenly lose all sexual feeling when I cover my head. I was really worried that I wouldn’t find any acceptance among them. I wanted to know why a German woman could accept me but Lebanese lesbians had a problem.

Then I met the lesbian community. And I was faced with a new set of problems. The first thing I heard from them was: “A dyke wearing a hijab?! How can you be both?!” I got this from a lot of people. Or I also faced the problem of not fitting in socially. Most girls in the lesbian community liked to go out to bars and drink. I don’t like to do any of those things. If I was interested in dating a girl in the community, I would have to make sure first that she was ok with my hijab before I asked her. I thought it was unfair. I wasn’t judging any of the girls because I didn’t share their party-going fervor and drinking habits. Why should they judge me like this? I started to feel I was undate-able.

My friends convinced me that if someone felt awkward dating me because of my veil, they didn’t deserve me. I get along with great friends from other religions. One is very respectful and never drinks in front of me. You would be surprised. My hijab even protects me from being objectified by other women. One thing I love about being veiled is that people aren’t paying attention to what I’m wearing or my hair style. They’re listening to what I’m saying. Either they like it or they don’t. And, girl, do I have a lot to say.
Mary Turner Lane Award

The Mary Turner Lane Award is a student paper competition established in honor of the late Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women’s studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The competition is open to any currently enrolled female LAU student. The award, consisting of $500 and a certificate, will go to the best research paper on women/gender studies or original piece of writing such as personal or argumentative essay, (possibly but not necessarily) completed as one of the requirements of a class taken at LAU (literature, language, social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy, education etc.). Below are the two winning papers (2013).

Winning Graduate Research Paper

Women’s Resistance to Hostile Spaces

Mona Kazzaz

Civil war in Lebanon has lasted for fifteen years and has claimed a large number of victims between dead and wounded. War’s victims are not only individuals involved in the battlefield to fight for a cause they believe in, but also women who usually do not participate in face to face battles. In times of war, men who are not soldiers refrain from going out owing to the military situation outside. Home is thus transformed from a place where a woman can achieve partial freedom, to a space where she is monitored by the male gaze continuously. She thus becomes a double victim: victim of an outside patriarchal society which dictates rules of behavior she should abide by, and a victim of the power her husband, father, and brother exert on her inside her home. According to Blunt and Rose (1994), space is “central both to masculinist power and to feminist resistance” (p. 1) since men impose rules that women try to resist.

The two novels discussed in this paper are Binayat Mathilde (1999) and Tawahin Beirut (1976). The main action in both takes place in Beirut. Both works describe the plight of the female from the perspective of different women: Katia, the two aunts, two women at the bakery, the narrator’s mother and Mathilde in Binayat Mathilde. In Tawahin Beirut, the women examined are: Mme Rose, Zannoub, Miss Marie and Tamima. Women in the two novels are portrayed as powerless even in their most powerful moments of decision making because the social structure works against them. The power relations between men and women almost always privilege men over women. In this context, women are different from men socially, economically, and sexually, but they are also different among one another because each one of them fights essentialism in her own way and from her own place that doesn’t resemble
any other. Thus the need for “plurilocality” or “the diverse spatialities of different women” as Rose calls it. This paper discusses the secondary characters’ conflict with space in general and then targets Mathilde and Tamima at a later stage as they are the protagonists of the two novels. It aims at showing how women who abide by society’s division of gendered space can survive on relatively good terms with this society. Those whose bodies diverge from the norm endure society’s hostility and marginalization.

Body

Binayat Mathilde: Of Other Women

Women have achieved highly respectable positions in the workplace and society owing to education. Still, when Katia, Nabiha Shibani’s daughter reaches the bookcase in her house, she doesn’t do it to get a book only. We see her move her fingers among the books as if caressing them rather than wanting to read them. Her dress lifts up to show her legs. She puts her feet on the warm carpet in search of a bodily sensation. The space becomes sexualized rather than a place of study or reading. Her sister is depicted as lying, a position that denotes laziness or sexual “readiness” for a male. On the other hand her brother, the male who seeks knowledge because he is rational and mindful of a possible future career, reads at his desk in a room that belongs to him alone. Katia moves around in the house without being anchored in any fixed place, while he has his own desk and room to stay in:

She crossed the cold living room, which was normally kept locked, paying no attention to the furniture set around its walls and in its corners. Her feet would cross the warm carpet, and when she reached her room she paid no attention to her sister reclining on her bed or to her brother reading at his desk in the next room (Daoud, 1999, p. 29).

On the other hand, Young (1990) speaks of confinement as a body trapped by its own gender. A researcher in feminist social theory, Young thinks that this gender division dictates the behavior of women but also, unwittingly, that of men. It dictates the behavior of women who “make a spectacle” of themselves by objectifying themselves with “too much rouge, a dingy bra strap showing” (Rose, 2002, p. 317). They display themselves publically to attract male attention. When the narrator’s nameless aunt discovers her husband’s unfaithfulness, she follows Nabiha Shibani’s advice:

Nabiha al-Shibani had advised her to dress up for him and fuss over him when he was at home. She acted on this advice and began, in the early afternoon, to send the children to the park, and to lock as many doors as she could. He did not look at her. (Daoud, 1999, p. 62)

What is ironic in this passage is that the aunt expects attention from her husband after making some improvements on her physical appearance that he notices but doesn’t respond to. She knows the strategy has failed. When she sees lipstick on his handkerchief, she confronts him in the bedroom, a place where women use their body to attract men. Marilyn Frye maintains that “domestic geography” (Rose, 2002, p. 315) in any patriarchal society allows women to be angry in the kitchen only, the site of their domestic work. The aunt’s brother acts in the traditional way a Middle Eastern
man does in such circumstances: with one hand he closes her mouth to stop her from speaking her mind. With the other hand he holds her husband to forbid him from hitting her, keeping in mind that she is an object he possesses:

My uncle stood between them, with one hand over his sister’s mouth, and with the other, fending off her husband, who kept trying to get at her, and then backing off. (Daoud, 1999, p. 63)

It is true that the image the aunt projects is far from the stereotyped image of a docile female, but she loses her battle with her husband anyhow. When she forbids him from coming home, he finds the idea not unjust in the least, and he goes away. When he comes back after reconciliation, he doesn’t wait for her to forget, which shows that he is in control: “It was too quick, the way things returned to normal between them, and it was not to my aunt’s liking” (Daoud, 1999, p. 64).

Other women in the novel don’t own their bodies too, so men assign them the space they are to occupy without even asking them and the women do not object. When the narrator’s uncle buys a new car and wants to take the family around in it, the aunt who usually sits in the front sits in the back because a new male friend wants to join in:

My aunt would sit beside her brother in the front seat, and her children sat with my other aunt in the back. That was the arrangement until after a while he became friendly with one of our village relatives and sat him up front, while my two aunts crowded with the children into the back. (Daoud, 1999, p. 66)

Even the way some of these women move and use their bodies is artificially constructed to suit the expectations of the society they live in. They don’t choose a place in open space to sit, but an enclosed and hidden place, as if public open spaces are meant for men only. These women are self-conscious of their bodies. Mulvey asserts that they act as if an “abusive masculine heterosexuality” (Parker, 2008, p. 207) is watching them from a panopticon, taking photos of them to later judge them and evaluate them in accordance with the dichotomy of whore or virgin. The narrator’s other aunt ’Aliyya romantically imagines herself being photographed sitting under a tree or near a creek. Because the photograph cannot be changed once taken, ‘Aliyya’s posture ensures that the photo projects an image of her as a pure virgin:

Both my aunts treated their day out as if someone had instructed them how to behave. They sat in the shade of a tree or in a secluded spot near the water. My aunt Aliya imagined herself in a photograph that showed her sitting under the tree and near the water. (Daoud, 1999, p. 67)

Patriarchy and masculinity have always played a repressive role in the lives of women and the place these women should occupy. When the grandfather comes from the village to live in Beirut, he sets up rules that the aunt has to abide by. He chooses where he will sleep, and even if it is in the middle of the living room, she does not refuse. She makes special kinds of food for him and keeps the place tidy and calm. Unlike women of the same age, he still attracts females who are attracted
to a strongly built man. At the same time, these women are unable to express to him their admiration of his body because it is not socially accepted. It would mean they are transgressing the limit of their restricted space. Only men can express physical attraction and be open or even brag about it:

My grandfather was pounding the dough with both hands, the sweat glistening on his bare chest. [The two women] continued to look at him and whisper softly until my father came back to the counter. (Daoud, 1999, p. 58)

Once he decides that he needs to move back to the village, the aunt is fast to pack his things up. This reaction is understandable if one looks at the suffering she undergoes while he is around, being always there to answer to his needs. Not only that, he expects his daughter to be servile to him, because in his mind this is what real women do. Her performance of femininity is in line with social expectations. When he leaves she removes any traces of him in his room underlying her rejection of the fake role she has been obliged to play. She is so eager for him to leave and for herself to control space, but she cannot divulge this for fear of his reaction. She only changes the setting of his room when she is sure he is far away:

My aunt simply packed him a bundle of his clothes, he took it up and walked down the stairs. And when she saw, from the balcony, that he had covered a good distance in the direction of the market and the car that was waiting to take him away, she rushed to the corner where he had been sleeping, took his rolled-up mattress to another room, and pulled out of the wall the nails on which he used to hang his clothes. (Daoud, 1999, p. 56)

The narrator’s mother is mild in dealing with her own suffering and resistance. The despotic aunt divides the house as she pleases, making the mother’s life in the house uncomfortable: “She said she could not relax in the flat” (Daoud, 1999, p. 30). The aunt locks her two rooms leaving the children to wreak havoc on the mother’s rooms. The aunt attends to the minor demands of the unmarried uncle while the mother looks after his major needs. The aunt literally puts his mother in a corner and eventually succeeds in driving her out. The sentence, “It saddened her that we were leaving the flat after all those years (Daoud, 1999, p. 93) is repeated twice to show the mother’s sorrow at having to evacuate the house in which they have always felt like strangers anyway. Her son remarks that her tears are kept in her throat, farewell words come out distorted, and even her voice has a strange intonation that the son can’t recognize. Her body itself is perceived by her son as shrinking to mirror the grief she feels at her new situation:

My mother’s steps grew smaller the higher we climbed the steep street to the petrol station. Her short legs seemed to move nimbly, as she took more steps, but she was barely moving forward. (Daoud, 1999, p. 94)

**Of Mathilde**

*Binayat Mathilde* talks about a real life character whose name is Mrs Mathilde Bahour, a landlady massacred by a man who rented a room in her apartment in the 1980’s. The title of the novel plays an important role in directing the reader’s perspective.
As Ken Seigneurie mentions, the title of the novel *Binayat Mathilde*, is translated into English by Peter Theroux as *The House of Mathilde* and not Mathilde’s Building. The Arabic title cannot be literally translated into English because Mathilde’s house “embodies both the repression and the license characteristic of society” (Seigneurie, 2011, p. 48). It represents the city’s tensions in times of war and Mathilde’s irresponsible act of welcoming a stranger into the house. Mathilde’s home also resists change with the author repeating that it hasn’t changed. This is a synecdoche of a whole building trying to stay alive in the middle of a raging ugly war. Her home is also the unifying symbol of all the women in the novel who struggle for freedom irrespective of or within the norms sanctioned by society.

On the other hand, Wikipedia states that Mathilde is derived from Old High German and means “mighty in battle”. In fact, we see Mathilde throughout the story silently and metaphorically launching battle after battle against a society that refuses to acknowledge her freedom. An example of this would be her indifference to the chit-chat that takes place in the building when she refuses to go to the wedding of the narrator’s uncle. Even when her best friend Mme Khayyat begs her, and with all the neighbors going to the wedding, she does what she thinks is good for her. Young (1990) is against “the ideal of community” because it “generates borders, dichotomies, and exclusions” (p. 301) to those who don’t belong. This ideal doesn’t allow difference and represses people who have different views. Community molds individuality into the collectivity of the whole, which Mathilde rejects. Mathilde doesn’t even think that Mme Khayyat is serious in this demand:

Mathilde paid little attention when Madame Khayyat tried to convince her to go to the wedding like all the other neighbours. She would not even believe that her neighbor had seriously meant what she said. (Daoud, 1999, p. 86)

Mathilde is recalcitrant, and she is openly so. Even at the age of fifty, she does not keep her relation to her lover secret, and gossip says that she knew him even before her husband’s death. She rushes to the balcony of her house where everybody can see her waving to him when he comes. His outer appearance in the novel makes the reader more aware of Mathilde’s unruly behavior: “he looked childish in his velvet trousers and plimsolls” (Daoud, 1999, p. 48). This man is not only having an unconventional affair with Mathilde, but is also oblivious of the neighbors’ awareness of the affair. The neighbors do not stomach her unlawful relation to the “red man”, whose name comes from the color of his car. The car’s red color is significant on two levels. It is the color of passion and it indirectly foreshadows Mathilde’s red blood that is shed at her body’s dismemberment. When his visits start to grow apart, she doesn’t show any kind of emotion and goes on with her life regularly since she is aware that her relation with him is transient: “The disappearance of the red-faced man in the Gordini came as no surprise to Mathilde” (Daoud, 1999, p. 74).

Women are used to disciplining their bodies when they are under the microscope of the patriarchal gaze. According to Mulvey (1989), scopophilia or “the pleasure of looking at another person as an erotic object” is usually done by men (p. 7). It reduces women to objects of the male gaze, and this way women are disciplined but they also lose their agency. They discipline themselves even when the male gaze is missing from
their lives because they want to fit male expectations. Mathilde is a widow who lives on her own:

Mathilde, when she sat on her bed amid her coats and hats, never allowed herself to feel that she was all alone in the flat, so she did not curl her feet up beneath her on the bed. She sat with them straight out before her, and that severe look never left her face. (Daoud, 1999, p. 53)

Her house looks more like a threatening prison than a safe home. To use Gillian Rose’s words, “women’s sense of embodiment makes space feel like a thousand piercing eyes” (Rose, 2002, p. 317). Because of this and because she diverts from the norm, Mathilde unconsciously does to herself what otherwise society would do to her: she locks herself up. She prefers her space to be opaque because she wants people to know her femininity is not too easily defined and because transparency is the space of the male who claims to know all. When she enters the house: “Mathilde closed the doors and the wooden shutters. She also locked the glass-leafed doors between the rooms and turned on the electric lamp” (Daoud, 1999, p. 53). She cannot help wanting to act “right” even when the masculine gaze does not judge her.

Part three of the novel revolves mainly around her. Chapter one of part three opens with the same sentence repeated twice in the chapter: “Mathilde would not have listened so closely had it not been for her fear” (Daoud, 1999, p. 125). Daoud writes this sentence in the third conditional form to convey the message that Mathilde is someone who would never listen to anyone were she not obliged to by an overwhelming fear for her life. Ironically, Mathilde would never have thought that the student/tenant she welcomes to rent a room in her apartment will end up her killer. Another similar sentence in the same chapter is: “Mathilde wouldn’t even have opened her door to him if it had not been for the shells” (Daoud, 1999, p. 126). The negation in these three sentences with the use of the third conditional allow Mathilde to create excuses for herself to justify this bold move. The person she hosts is of a different gender, social class, religion, and the age difference between them is remarkable. A short while before the killing, his rural and primitive nature surfaces again and Daoud (1999) writes: “His eyes narrowed, and suddenly his thin face looked like that of an old man from the South” (p. 162).

By the end of the story, Mathilde is transformed from a woman as cold as ice to another who is in such desperate need for company. The exactness of his words, his learned discourse and the softness in his voice along with the war taking place outside lead her to accept his proposal of renting a room in her house. Her world and actions are so rapidly changing that they are becoming undecipherable if not even foreign to her:

It was a long day. She had spent the two previous days doing whatever cleaning she could, in anticipation of his coming. She did not know why, nor did she know why she had overdone it- her broom and cloth reaching corners and crannies that no one ever saw. (Daoud, 1999, p. 140)

His stay changes her from an unconventional woman to a housewife who cares about the cleanliness of her house to irrational extremes. She may also be cleaning the
house to metonymically clean herself from the remains of a sexual contact they might have had together.

Mathilde indirectly expresses before her fateful death a need for spatial intimacy with the tenant. She changes her position in bed and in the kitchen many times to get spatially closer to him:

Mathilde did not realize that she was careful not to go near the door to the parlour, or that, when she slept, she lay on the southern part of the bed, leaving empty the side of the bed that was closest to his room (Daoud, 1999, p. 148).

She then sleeps in the room next door to his: “Only the little hallway and the Western-style bathroom separated the rooms where she slept” (Daoud, 1999, p. 161). And then: “The maid on the fourth floor of the next building once saw him going into her room and coming out of it while she was lying on the bed” (Daoud, 1999, p. 161). These three examples show that the repression Mathilde has submitted herself and her body to in the past no longer holds. She has an urge to lie on the bed as if she were waiting for him and she even counts the hours left for him to come home. She knows that the “unoppressive city is defined as openness to unassimilated otherness” (Young, 1990, p. 319), but she doesn’t know that such a city leads to her death.

Tawahin Beirut: Of Other Women
Rose Khoury in Tawahin Beirut is the owner of a building/part time brothel at Hamra. This lady has an intricate relation to places: she is at the same time placeless and anchored in place. She is placeless because she has spent the beginning of her life roaming in the East, West, South and North of the country, changing her name to suit each location. Under patriarchy, she belongs to no specific place and has no fixed name because males decide on her behalf what her location and name should be. She is called Zahra the daughter of priest Nematallah Jnadios in the North of Lebanon and Zouhour Shawish the wife of a Muslim supposedly from the South: “In the past she had moved from the east side of town to the west, from north to south and back” (Awwad, 1976, p. 8). She is Warda Nematallah on the road to Beirut. When she finally settles down alone in Hamra, without the power of patriarchy ruling her, she also settles on a definite name which is Sitt Rose or Mme Rose. She owns three taxis. Cars are known to be non places according to Lefebvre, a critic of social space. The fact that cars are always on the move makes it hard to locate Mme Rose in a fixed place. She also shows masculine rather than feminine traits. Lefebvre (2008) thinks the relationship of men to the cars they own is loaded with “daring, virility, mastery of self, energy, and even sexuality” (p. 212), which shows Mme Rose’s masculine rather than feminine traits.

On the other hand, she is anchored in place when the reader is introduced to her as a lady sitting at a table with maps one on top of the other. Maps of the new building she tries to erect define her. These maps help her fight the feeling of homelessness and placelessness she has always endured as a female moving from one place to another. They change her to a unified whole of mind and body since they position and fixate her, the female prostitute, in a male world that’s usually alien and hostile to her. Maps make her visible in that male world after being excluded from it for so long. They
allow her to have her own vision of the city. She becomes the “master subject” who has all the self-confidence she needs to direct the work of male engineers. She even curses them from that position for lying to her:

She swallowed one of her pills, cursing architects and architecture. They assured her in the beginning that the costs would not be more than 150,000 Lebanese pounds. They had now put them up to 250,000. (Awwad, 1976, p. 7)

Not only that. Mme Rose’s house is divided into a living room, five rooms, and a kitchen. Her room is at the beginning of the aisle, with a window looking down the street and another at the stairway in a panopticon form to control the building and the street together. Once her new building is constructed, she refuses to give the rooftop floor to anyone else because she wants to have a panoramic view of the neighborhood so as to control it: “The roof she intended for herself, no one else would be above her” (Awwad, 1976, p. 10).

Zannoub is another woman whose relation to space is compromised. She is a servant from Akkar at Mme Rose’s house. Her patriarchal father comes to Mme Rose to ask for the wage of Zannoub that the latter is not supposed to touch. He beats her on the staircase because she asks for a small gold bracelet. Even under such appalling situation, Zannoub doesn’t give up. Zannoub breaks the boundaries of patriarchy and fatherhood by publically showing her refusal to be ill-treated, and by reacting violently to it both verbally and physically. Using language and her body to defend her rights publically, she transgresses laws that keep her mouth shut and her body inside the house. What she does is unusual for a rural girl: “She got up, covered in blood, and leapt towards him, screaming: ‘Kill me, go on, kill me! I’d be better off dead!’” (Awwad, 1976, p. 54)

Later on, Zannoub sleeps happily in Tamima’s room, considered as shelter by Zannoub after her unfortunate encounter with her father. Sitting by the window, she watches dustmen picking up garbage. Just like her father throws her on the staircase and steps on her, the dustman throws a cardboard box full of kittens on the truck after stepping on it. He “lift[ed] his foot and crush[ed] the box with his foot before pouring more rubbish on top of it” (Awwad, 1976, p. 57). Zannoub and the kittens are treated in the same violent way by the same masculine power in the same place (the streets). Both Zannoub and the kittens will suffer the same unjust fate. She thinks that both of them belong to one place: the dumpster near the shore. She predicts her fate by thinking about the kittens: “And how would the kittens that survived manage? Was there some place on the beach rubbish tip where small kittens could hide?” (Awwad, 1976, p. 57).

We later see a seven-month pregnant Zannoub committing suicide by throwing herself off the Raouche cliff. Ironically, the shore that may be the kittens’ shelter according to her is her own deathbed:

At ten o’clock yesterday morning passers-by at Raouche saw a young woman throw herself into the sea. They rushed to rescue her, but she died on the way to hospital. (Awwad, 1976, p. 165)
Before that, she runs away from Mme Rose’s house so as not to be aborted by force. In such a society, her body is not her own. She can’t decide what to do with her illicit teenage pregnancy. Mme Rose, Kirsh and Jaber decide what to do with it. She is desperate for a place to stay in. Unable to root herself in any specific place first because she is a woman and second because she is a sinner, she roams Lebanon aimlessly like Mme Rose did before her:

She just got into the lift of the first building she came to on Hamra, and from there on the roof. She stayed on the roof all night. By daybreak she was on the Sidon road; not the road to Akkar. But who could she turn to in Sidon? She wandered around all day. She went into an apartment building intending to sleep under the landing. She came back from Sidon on foot. She sat down at the edge of the road. (Awwad, 1976, p. 163)

Miss Marie is another woman who has a problematic relation with her body and the space she occupies. She is a nurse in the American University Hospital. She is an intelligent and active young woman. Orphaned at a young age, she has to quit school and work to put food on the table for her widowed mother and three sisters. She becomes in no time chief of staff at the surgery section. She even has a “room of her own”, and Tamima envies her for having it: “What a lovely apartment she had to live in, with a living-room, two bedrooms and a kitchen. In a very smart and clean building too. There she was free and independent (Awwad, 1976, p. 63). The space the Christian Miss Marie lives in is quite different from that of the Muslim Tamima and Zannoub, even though Miss Marie is mistakenly killed in that same house. She is the subject of Jaber’s violence for the mere fact of being a woman. She also behaves in the same controlled manner in the presence of men. This independent woman is unable to be herself in the presence of Akram Jourdi. She cannot behave as she usually does. In fact, with her close friend Tamima around, Miss Marie is playful and merry. In the hospital where he lay sick, and where his gaze cannot reach her: “Mary felt a certain buoyancy inside her; she walked on to Akram Jurdi’s room as if she were dancing” (Awwad, 1976, p. 96).

Because he doesn’t see her and thus can’t judge her, she lets herself and her body go, walking as if she were dancing. But when he is around, we see her puzzled and wanting to do too many things at once, which makes her look and sound ridiculous because this is what men expect her to be. Man’s presence pressures her to perform according to what society sees as feminine role, especially when she is in love. Because she’s a woman, she is supposed to be awkward and silly when in love:

She was wondering where she could put the huge basket of red irises which had just arrived. Every day there were more bouquets which she kept on arranging. As she did she would marvel and exclaim and laugh aloud. She went back to him now and took the thermometer from his mouth. (Awwad, 1976, p. 97)

He, on the other hand, shows composure in and control of the conversation: “But Akram Jurdi had turned over that particular page: the conversation seemed to irritate him. He asked her to talk to him about herself” (Awwad, 1976, p. 97).
Even after having proposed to her, she talks about Akram only after adding the title of Mr to his name as if he were her boss. She doesn’t voice her opinion about Tamima’s relation with Hani without referring to Akram as back up or validation to her own:

Monsieur Akram was here. He is a Moslem and an advocate and all he wants is your own good. If there is nothing for it but to get married- and this is Monsieur Akram’s view- then the only solution is for you and Hani to run away to America, after he has his degree, on some moonless night! Monsieur Akram says these obstacles will disappear in future. (Awwad, 1976, p. 161)

Of Tamima
The novel Tawahin Beirut is translated into English as Death in Beirut. Tawahin in English means mills and mills are known to crush and grind, causing death. Unfortunately, the only characters who will be squeezed in the novel and who will be lead to their death in Beirut are females because the traditional society they live in controls their behavior. The men, on the other hand, criminals and malicious as they are, go scot-free because of the same traditional society’s double standards. The verb to mill also means to condition with a rotary cutter. But doesn’t Q̟amui’s knife on Tamima’s face in part two of the novel shape her destiny?

As for her name, Tamima comes from the Arabic verb ‘tamma’, meaning completed and perfected. In the context of the story, Tamima is a young Shiite Muslim girl from the South of Lebanon who seeks education and the freedom of urban life in Beirut. Rebellious as she is, she is convinced that her life is never complete without these two elements. Education empowers her and relieves her from Jaber, her controlling brother:

From now on it [this path] would eat away no more of her life than the time separating her from the school-leaving examination, the Baccalaureate. ... The only thing she knew, and others were going to know, was that her life was her own. ... She would live just as she wanted to. (Awwad, 1976, p. 2)

But this may only be a dream that is not meant to be realized. Jaber plans to force her to marry the wealthy Jamil Muwali. After refusing this business deal called marriage, Jaber disciplines her by hitting her. She is unable to control her life and she hits rock bottom. She runs to the only place that reflects the devastation she feels, the valley: “She turned her back and walked down to the valley” (Awwad, 1976, p. 33) where she joins the fedayeen.

Writing in her diary, she seeks to defy ideologies that keep her place in society static and fixed. She wants to carve a place for her in life and not in society: “I want my place in life rather than my place in society” (Awwad, 1976, p. 79). To do that, she needs to leave the house she calls a “coop” and her rural Mahdiya. These two places represent for her the spaces of repression she most hates. For her, Hamra is the place to be in, but Hamra is a location that is not going to be easily accessible to her. When Mme Rose first sees her, she offers her a job and Jaber’s room in his absence only after noticing that her body can make heads turn. This means that
Tamima can have Jaber’s room on one condition, she needs to prostitute herself. Hamra also is connected to women with slit throats. Not only does Jaber call her a bitch because she visits Hamra, he threatens to kill her. Beirut in general and Hamra in particular are not appropriate places for her but very adequate ones for him: “He threatened to kill her if she ever again set foot on Hamra or made even a move in the direction of Beirut. Then he went back to where he had come from” (Awwad, 1976, p. 18). When Tamima sits at one sidewalk café, she opts for what Lefebvre calls the “representational space,” (The Production of Space 79) the directly lived experience of the inhabitants of a certain space. This view turns Hamra into a place Tamima directly participates in making by projecting on it her own perception and dreams: “She went for a stroll, then she came back to sit in a pavement café. Hamra had dazzled her with its bursting life and colour” (Awwad, 1976, p. 5).

For Tamima “the desire to see the city [precedes] the means of satisfying it,” (De Certeau, 92) and she seems to be ready to sacrifice everything for this desire. Hamra’s phantasmagoria and its ever changing scenery attract her. After trying to commit suicide, she dreams she is surrounded by many ladies looking like Mme Rose and by rats that symbolize decay. Tamima doesn’t know where she is exactly: “Was this the Hamra area, or Bab Idriss, or Raouche?” (Awwad, 1976, p. 105). She tries hard to discern where she is but fails to open her eyes. She can only see the alluring Mme Rose clearly. Blinded by what she expects Beirut to be, this metaphorical blindness prevents her from seeing that this city is really not the place for her. She can never survive in it. Tamima later hallucinates that rats, connected to disease, filth and hidden truths, roam around Beirut. This signifies that the totality of the city is a threatening secretive place she can never decode.

In the darkened café called “Tea and Phone”, she looks at strangers’ behavior to learn more about life in the city. The anonymity of city life attracts her because she mistankenly thinks that she can blend in and do the same without being identified. She believes space in Beirut is partitioned: “The booths were separated by partitions, each was a world of its own” (Awwad, 1976, p. 98). This gives her more freedom to act the way she pleases. According to Lefebvre (2008), the café presents a place where “what is said may be superficial, [but] the freedom to say it is fiercely defended” (p. 41). In the café she can forget about Qammoo’i whose name means repression in Arabic and who exerts a shady and threatening presence in her life:

She was in the dark café again, in her corner. Looking at the customers, scattered couples, whispering to each other, laughing, embracing publicly. But nobody looked, nobody listened. The booths were separated by partitions, each was a world of its own. Love nests. (Awwad, 1976, p. 98)

Tamima knows that the primitive forces in rural Mahdiya do not belong to Mahdiya only but to all of Lebanon. Her body is inscribed by these forces. She criticizes these by criticizing the society that allows masculinity to be the guardian of her own virginity. She rejects the double standard of society that uses honor as a tool of oppression against women, instead of asking men to honor women by allowing them education and financial support. According to her, the relationship she has with Ramzi Raad is her reaction to the hypocrisy of society since a woman’s virtue should not be
measured by her virginity. Her body becomes a bone of contention between old rural traditions that refuse to die and a fast changing city that cannot keep up with the change:

She contemplated her rounded buttocks and her rounded, gleaming thighs and that small dense bush of hair. There lay her honour, like a beast of prey. There slept her virtue in the den of lions (Awwad, 1976, p. 101).

Even Hani Ra’i’s liberating discourse about changing Lebanon to a better place by calling for interreligious marriage and social reform is nothing but an empty display of ideas. He does give Tamima the public space she longs for by allowing her to summarize answers of a certain inquiry about the revolution and to present them at a meeting. But he also gives her a slap on the face when she exposes to him her virginity loss. His house in Deir Limtell is also telling. Many hurdles stand between her and this house: her sexual freedom, her different religion, the class differences between Hani and herself. She looks and touches the gun that dates back to the nineteenth century. It is as old as the customs of the Ra’i family. These customs stand between the two lovers at the end of the story in the form of places Tamima is categorically banned from entering. She needs to negotiate her differences with Hani and in the coming example, the wish expresses a hypothesis that never becomes real:

Tamima stroked the rifle with the palm of her hand and touched the walls fondly. She wished she could make a tour of the house, go into the kitchen, see his room, his bed and the wardrobe where he hung his clothes (Awwad, 1976, p. 93).

A final thought on her relation to Hani. She only wishes to enter his bedroom in Deir Limtell. But when he visits her at Miss Marie’s, he does enter her bedroom knowing that she is not around as if her space is open while his remains closed. Not only that. He expresses his admiration of Picasso’s paintings she hangs over her desk. According to Lefebvre (2008):

Picasso’s cruelty toward the body, particularly the female body, which he tortures in a thousand ways and caricatures without mercy, is dictated by the dominant form of space, by the eye and by the phallus - in short, by violence. (p. 302)

The violence of Picasso’s paintings towards the female body will be mirrored in the fate of both ladies. Tamima, supposedly hating society’s violence towards her, ironically joins at the end a violent group called fedayeen. Miss Marie is also mistankenly killed instead of Tamima who lives at Mary’s house.

Tamima joins the fedayeen at the end of the novel and relinquishes all love relationships. She says this in a diary that she sends to Hani. She does not specify the place from which she writes in the present because this present is as hazy as the future she chooses to build for herself with the fedayeen. She has gambled with all things available to her in the past and she has no power to stop this now. She knows that, having broken all laws and transgressed all norms, her place in society is so compromised that she has no choice but to go even further in this transgression. The only place available to her is where she breaks laws and criticizes principles: “You
remember we spoke in the meeting yesterday about acts of violence, contrary to established and acknowledged laws and codes. That is where I belong” (Awwad, 1976, p. 184). She enlists with the fedayeen when she realizes that the space accessible to her as a normal but free woman is shrinking. This is a step that looks like a double-edged sword: she gains self-confidence because the fedayeen will give her tasks to perform. Still, she is under the control of men because the fedayeen are a patriarchal group themselves. She jumps from the frying pan to the fire.

Conclusion
In a nutshell, women who are under societal and cultural pressure usually rebel. They may live in the city like Mathilde or migrate to it in search of freedom or selfhood. These women seek affinity with the space they live in. Fearing war and living alone, Mathilde thinks she is unable to contain the distant rooms in her own house so she invites a male stranger to keep her company. Tamima feels affinity with Hani’s house, its wooden ceiling and adorned windows because it is where she thinks they can bridge their differences. But sometimes forces of space conspire against women because, as Lefebvre puts it space is not innocent. As said previously, their “plurilocality” makes them respond differently to their plight: space contributes to Mathilde’s death, to the confinement of the narrator’s mother in Binayat Mathilde and to Tamima’s tragedy.

Binayat Mathilde and Tawahin Beirut show women whose dreams have become nightmares. The social space in which they live binds them to certain fixed categories from which there is little chance to escape. Those who try to escape usually meet their death. Miller, an American playwright and essayist asks one to: “Imagine, just imagine, that there is nothing ahead of you but your destiny,” (Awwad, 1976, p. 163) and Awwad uses this sentence in the fourth part of his novel to describe these women’s lives. Both authors speak of a destiny that is impossible to escape. The women studied above are bold and courageous. Their behavior is the result of long centuries of unhappiness with a space that denies them their humanity and that feeds off their submission. Even if these women fail in radically changing the world they live in, this space will never be the same after all is said and done. All these women want is to be able to “gesture and stride, stretch and push to the limits … [their] physical capabilities” (Rose, 2002, p. 316).

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Throughout history, the majority of artists have been men, and quite often the women in their works have been featured as passive objects of male sexual desire. This sort of one-sided dynamic is ubiquitous; it can be detected in the vast majority of Western nude paintings, and even modern advertisements tend to conform to the same pattern (Berger, 1977). As a consequence, feminist discourse of the representation of women in visual culture has focused on the concept of male gaze. However, the proliferation of images in modern times has given rise to a “broad array of gazes and implied viewers” (Sturken, 2005, p. 87). Women are no longer simply objectified, nor is the business of directing the gaze relegated to solely a male domain.

Nadine Labaki’s latest film Where Do We Go Now (2011) offers a perfect example of the multiplicity, and often complexity, of gazes. The celebrated Lebanese director tells the story of an unnamed Arab village co-inhabited by Muslims and Christians. Amid escalating tensions between the two religious groups, women of the village, tired of the incessant fighting, decide to unite forces to pacify their aggressive men. The film has earned several high-profile accolades in the West and has even been dubbed by some critics as feminist artwork. While the film clearly departs from the Orientalist tradition of depicting Arab women as passive, mysterious lovers, it is important to question whether or not the film merits such praise. Particular elements of the movie — the fact that objectification of women is still present (though in an unexpected way) and the fact that gender roles are portrayed as opposing binaries, cast doubt on the so-called revolutionary nature of the film. Finally, wittingly or unwittingly, the film seems unable to resist engaging with Orientalist clichés, thus rendering the people and their environs into an object of an “othering” and exposing them to a degrading gaze.

Gender Roles under Gaze: Active Women, Foolish Men

Traditionally, women have predominately been cast as sexual objects in cinema. As Mulvey (2003) has argued, objectification is accompanied by passivity, and while women serve as erotic spectacle, it is the men who advance the storyline. Admittedly, Labaki’s movie seems to depart from this convention to some extent. Firstly, women are the clear protagonists of the film, the story is told from the women’s point of view and their actions fuel the course of events. Though the village they inhabit is clearly led by men, Labaki implies that the women pull the strings from behind the scenes. By destroying the television and burning newspapers, women become the ultimate arbiters of information. Likewise, their collective power is demonstrated on many occasions when they successfully distract their men from violent behavior. This is demonstrated in a scene where a group of women slyly wait for the men of the village to become transfixed by a staged belly dance performance, so that they may use the opportunity to bury a large quantity of weapons at a secret location. Finally,
the relative ease of the women’s ability to change their religion from Muslim to Christian or vice versa appears to position them as possessing significant clout in their community. That said, the final scene of the film features a solemn funeral for one of the sons of the village, where we see confused men asking the women where the body should be buried – on the Muslim or Christian side of the graveyard? Counter to the tone of the film, in Labaki’s ending, the women are more inclined to allow the question of *Where Do We Go Now* be determined by the men of the village and thus patriarchal dominance is re-established.

Secondly, Labaki completely avoids any hint of sexual objectification of the Arab women living in the village. There is a marked lack of sex scenes or sexual innuendoes directed at the women in the film. The nascent love affair between the leading female protagonist, Amal (played by Nadine Labaki), and the man renovating her café, is based on mutual attraction which avoids casting Amal as a mere object of his sexual desires. In fact, Amal is shown daydreaming about her crush, an unexpected reversal of the trend of women being on the receiving end of the gaze (see image 1). Labaki’s treatment of the village women is somewhat sanitized, casting them as noble mothers and heroic caretakers of the family, which recalls traditional attributes linked to femininity. Confined to this role they often attract a respectful or even admiring gaze from the male members of the family. There are several scenes where motherhood is clearly venerated as sons obey their mothers and freely express their love for them.

However, all these redeeming qualities are applied solely to the Arab women in the movie. Halfway through the film, female villagers decide to hire a group of Ukrainian dancers to entertain their men in an ultimately successful ploy to distract them from fighting. These “other” women are clearly treated as sights, and their bodily movements become objects of pleasure for the men (see image 2). Dressed in mini-skirts and tight tops to please the audience, their physical beauty is turned into a commercial product. More significantly, the Arab women participate in this objectification when they first encounter the Europeans. Staring through binoculars as the dancers descend from a bus, the Arab women adopt a voyeuristic gaze (see image 3). Soon after, we hear one of the Arab women criticizing the Ukrainians’ small breasts and mocking her “anorectic” thinness. Although the Ukrainian women are admired by the villagers, especially the men, they are set apart from the women of the village in that they derive their status solely from their physical appearance.

Despite this seemingly straightforward objectification of Ukrainian women, the gazes in Labaki’s movie are complex and not susceptible to easy generalization. Instead of passive submission to the desiring male gaze, women turn it into a tool to advance their own aims. One particular scene shows men in a local café engaged in a heated discussion about their weapons, when a
buxom blond dancer joins their table their veneer of machismo disappears. The men are shown to be clearly perplexed and are so taken with her that they don’t notice the recorder she cleverly leaves behind in an attempt to give women of the village access to their private conversations. In this instance, as well as the previously mentioned belly dance scene, Labaki succeeds in showing that the men’s masculinity is both potent and permeable. Nevertheless, such emancipatory elements do not trump the fact that in order to reach these goals, women still have to participate in the sexual objectification of their bodies, thus conforming to the rules of a patriarchal society.

Even if the movie manages to confront some conceptions linked to female representation in cinema, it is hardly a trailblazing original as it continues to indulge in a simplistic binary representation of men and women. While the village women grieve for the death of loved ones and desperately seek peace, the men are cast as reactionary characters who can be provoked to fight in a matter of few seconds (see image 4). Just like a pile of dynamite, they appear to be waiting for any external incitement, with little capability for common sense. She portrays the men as predictably hapless slaves of implied biological impulses: unable to resist urges of violence or sexuality. This one-dimensional representation is not only offending to men but implicates a larger problem: no adequate explanations are offered to explain the sectarian tensions between the villagers, except for antiquated religious prejudices, and the simple view that men are the root of all social problems. Unfortunately, Labaki indulges in an unsophisticated “men will be men” attitude that leaves no room for examining the possible political or economic grievances that often contribute to conflict.

Orientalist gaze: Between Fairytales and Conflicts

Despite some critical commentaries of Where Do We Go Now, overall the film was well-received with Western audiences. It garnered several awards, including Special Mention (Prize of the Ecumenical Jury) at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 and People’s Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival during the same year. The Guardian described the narrative of the film as “splendid”, and Huffington Post deemed the combination of “an amazing soundtrack” and “magical Mediterranean scenes” as the “perfect follow-up for her [Labaki’s] masterpiece Caramel” (Rothe, 2012).

Such resounding praise raises the provocative question: was the film so well received in the West...
because it panders to a traditional view of the Orient? Indeed, a closer look at the film reveals numerous Orientalist depictions of the Arab world. According to Edward Said (1978), Orientalism means imaging the East and the West as opposite entities where “the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen, thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just and Christian”. Labaki’s film offers a “native informer’s” account of almost all of these manufactured differences.

To start with, Labaki’s mise-en-scène features a distant and pristine village in the middle of nowhere—a nod to the image of the exotic yet underdeveloped East. The landscape might be magically beautiful, but primitive conditions force the villagers to live in a manner some Western countries did decades ago. For instance, although the village receives a new television (a Western symbol), a significant amount of time is dedicated to finding a place where an actual satellite signal can be reached. Despite the hardship associated with life in the village, images such as this correspond to Western nostalgia for a more natural way of life and this longing finds a romanticized manifestation in Oriental imaginary.\(^4\)
Partly due to the famous troops associated with the book *Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*, the East has captured the Western imagination with temptations of mystery and exotic wonderment. Perhaps the most stereotypical image of the Orient is the harem, a place confined to women only, it has become the obsession of many Western male artists who imagine it as a secret palace of pleasures. The Arabian Nights has also been a source of inspiration for some Western artists who have traveled to the East in the hopes of taking part in a magical, fairytale-like experience. If this was the expectation of Western viewers of *Where Do We Go Now*, Labaki does not disappoint them. In addition to attractive belly dancing women (see image 5), the director further engages with Orientalist logic by hinting that a supernatural current runs through the village. For instance, sacramental wine turns into blood, which then inexplicably finds itself on the foreheads of children celebrating their confirmation. This is followed by the mystical presence of goats in the local mosque. The clincher, though is when we see also a statue of Virgin Mary shedding tears of blood.

Simultaneously with the image of the mystical Orient, another picture of the East is formed: that of the land of irrational, violent barbarians. The basic theme of conflict is central to Labaki’s film, it both begins and ends with the image of a graveyard where too many villagers have been buried as a result of mindless armed confrontations (see image 6). The possibility of new conflict is omnipresent and always brimming beneath the surface, as if it was a natural feature of the village. In media interviews, Labaki states that her intention was to create a universal message of the absurdity of violence: “This conflict does not only happen in Lebanon. I see it everywhere. I can be in Paris in the Metro and see how people are scared of each other” (Hornaday, 2012). Yet, grounding the film as opposing camps of Muslim and Christian aligns with an Orientalist premise that considers Islamic and Christian civilizations distinct and incompatible. According to Edward Said, Islam was a “lasting trauma” for Europeans, and a shortcoming of Labaki’s movie is that it does not inspire much hope for this trauma becoming cured (Said, 1978).

**Conclusion**

Although Labaki’s film offers refreshing moments where women are shown to be in control in a patriarchal society, it does little to remove the objectifying gaze on women. Instead it is merely redirected on another, more narrowed group of females, in this case the Ukrainian dancers. Furthermore, if the aim of feminism is to oppose all limiting gender roles and norms, including those regulating the lives of men, Labaki does little to further this goal by offering a simplistic image of women and men fighting on opposite sides.

Thus, instead of renegotiating the concept of gaze, *Where Do We Go Now* offers an example of how deeply Labaki remains attuned to Western sensibilities of the Orient, which ultimately renders the film a rather toothless tribute to feminism. Orientalist images have been, and continue to be, a constant element in many Western works of art, as
women’s oppression in “other” lands tends to flatter the West’s sense of its own equalitarianism. What is peculiar about this film is that the director is Lebanese. This seems to imply that though the Arab countries achieved political independence decades ago, at the more general cultural and psychological level, Western domination ensues and is perhaps internalized to a certain degree. Just as women should critically analyze their role in cinema and in visual culture in general, Arabs should examine the way they are portrayed in works of art that originate from their own community. The first step to challenging stereotypes is to examine images of self—this is exactly where Arab artists have such an essential role to play. In Labaki’s movie, however, the Arab women might have escaped from the harem, only to be trapped in the traditional, Western image of the Orient.

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ENDNOTES


5. See Kamal el-Din, T. (n.d.).

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Reviewed by Norman Saadi Nikro

The remarkable production of fiction in Lebanon emerging from the long years of civil violence (1975-1990) and an ongoing restless aftermath is by no means confined to the Arabic language. Proliferating in a number of other languages, English has arguably become the preeminent non-Arab language in which contemporary diasporic Lebanese fiction is composed.

Similar to the contemporary Lebanese novel in Arabic, Lebanese Anglophone fiction is just as stylistically adventurous and obsessively experimental. As Edward Said once observed, the Lebanese novel emerging from the ravages of the civil war is characterized by the impossibility of novelistic form, symptomatically compressed into autobiography and memoir, corrupting any neat distinction between fact and fiction, presenting somewhat of a departure from a realist aesthetic that had to a large extent informed Arab fiction up to the late 1970s. And yet, Anglophone Lebanese fiction is more compelled to wrestle with an experience of diaspora and exile, of situating home as elsewhere, and articulating belonging as an unhomely prism refracting paths of migration.

Drawing on her research and publications over a ten year period, the Beiruti literary scholar Syrine Hout addresses this contemporary literary production, presenting critical readings of eleven Anglophone Lebanese novels. Most of these have been produced by writers living in North America, though also from England and Australia. Hout’s study includes four works by the San Francisco based Rabih Alameddine, two by the Canadian based Rawi Hage, one from United States based Patricia Sarrafian Ward, two from the Australian repatriated Nada Awar Jarrar, as well as novels by Tony Hanania and Nathalie Abi-Ezzi, both located in Britain. Hout’s attention to this geographical scattering of literary production marks out a critical site of analysis. In doing so, her book is timely not only because it identifies and discusses relevant themes, but because she develops certain conceptual terms of reference by which to map out an appropriate critical terminology.

Accordingly, as her subtitle suggests, home and diaspora are not to be assumed as opposites, but rather practices of literary production engaging the reverberating force of emotional distance, of separation and the murmuring impulses of longing by which this separation informs the composition of narrative fiction.

The emotional implications and literary associations of home, then, are central to Hout’s discussions, whereby she traces the significance of home along varied trajectories. In other words, the notion of home she critically situates through her close readings of the novels has to be understood as both singular and plural — a sense of Lebanon as place mediated by emotional attachments having to be articulated from elsewhere, or through returning to Lebanon from elsewhere; and a destabilizing sense of place informed through its irrevocable dispersal. As she points out in her introduction, her concern is with “the different meanings and reformulations of home, be it Lebanon as a nation, a particular dwelling house or apartment, a host country, an irretrievable pre-war childhood, a state of in-between dwelling, a portable state of mind, a utopian (political) ideal and/or the narrative itself” (p. 14).

Where the work of her writers articulates an ambivalent sense of Lebanon as home, the writers themselves carry an ambivalent experience of having their childhoods defined by the civil war.
This is an important aspect of Hout’s focus: born in Lebanon during the civil war or shortly before its outbreak in 1975, most of her writers were neither old enough to understand the violence and deprivation through memories of its prehistory, nor young enough to restrict their memories to those passed on by their parents’ generation. Consequently, as Hout puts into relief, “these authors are unique because they can rely neither on undiluted recollections of direct experiences nor on purely imaginative reconstructions of the older writers’ testimonies”—these last constituting novelists, such as Elias Khoury and Hanan al-Shaykh, who not only write in Arabic but more significantly produced their first literary works in the midst of the civil war.

This insight comes to have some bearing on Hout’s discussions of the overlapping and layered tensions between home and diaspora, as well as related registers of memory and trauma. The first of these assemblages (home/diaspora) informs Part I, “Homesickness and the Sickness of Home”, while the second (memory/trauma) informs Part II, “Trauma Narratives: The Scars of War”. In the first, Alemeddine’s *Koolaids: The Art of War* (1998), articulates a notion of home free from a nostalgic desire to return to an imagined pristine state of belonging and national identity. Alemeddine’s fragmented composition itself—what Hout describes as a “polyphonic and multi-generic collage”—works to stylistically render the desire for home complicated by the impossibility of satisfying the desire with any conclusiveness.

Likewise, Tony Hanania’s *Unreal City* (1999) hinges on a sense of home that cannot be untangled from the tension between an objective awareness of place and the subjective hues and stammers by which place is rendered unfamiliar. In the second chapter of Part I, Hout extends this thematic discussion to Alemeddine’s *The Perv: Stories* (1999) and Jarrar’s first novel, *Somewhere, Home* (2003).

If the emotional complex between home and diaspora is traversed by an experience that comes to inform the very style of literary production, then memory and trauma would render this relationship between experience and its literary articulation even more compelling. In part II, Hout draws on trauma studies to demonstrate how Alemeddine’s *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2002) and Ward’s *The Bullet Collection* (2003) can be read as trauma fiction. Both novels situate the past as a disjointed, episodic narrative that works to destabilize the present as an undifferentiated site of self-awareness. The repetitive style of *I, the Divine* and *The Bullet Collection* somehow simulate an ambivalence that defines trauma: a simultaneous demand for, though pathological refusal of, the articulation of narrative and historical awareness.

Hout’s reading of these novels extends to a consideration of how they go against the grain of the propensity of Lebanese public and political cultures to forget the civil war. Taking her cue from the work of Cathy Caruth, Hout suggests that through the very ambivalence of trauma it becomes possible to situate historical reference, whereby personal experience is set against memories of historical events. As Hout remarks on Ward’s protagonist: “Marianna’s angry voice delivers a (self) critical trauma narrative which combats public amnesia”, and thus “her testimony is both powerful and timely” (pp. 101-102).

Parts III and IV—“Playing with Fire at Home and Abroad” and “Exile versus Repatriation”—again begin with a novel by Alemeddine, *The Hakawati* (2008), and then Abi-Ezzi’s *A Girl Made of Dust* (2008). In these final sections Hout also discusses Rawi Hage’s *De Niro’s Game* (2007) and *Cockroach* (2009). Hage’s gritty realism is contrasted with the more elegiac tones of Jarrar’s *A Good Land* (2009). Where Hage’s novel cannot imagine a possible return to Lebanon—which Hout suggests
may well have provided an interesting twist to the protagonist’s inability to come to terms with his traumatic experiences of the civil war — the more romantic impulses of Jarrar’s third novel bring some sort of closure to the “emotional geography” of the narrative.

For Hout, post-war Anglophone Lebanese literature constitutes variable sites for a creative articulation of loss and renewal, across and in between social, cultural and emotional geographies. And yet, as the personal is set against a difficult history of violence and deprivation, this literary output works to render the past a pressing concern for the present. Her study ends on this point: “Remembering resists omission, making art in general and literature in particular a necessary channel for personal and historical agency in a time of deep emotional loss and suffering” (p. 202). This very peculiar and somewhat obsessive literary style somehow renders Lebanese Anglophone fiction compelling in terms of the entwinement of personal trajectories and historical destinies.

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The Who Is She in Lebanon online database is a project that started in 2008 following a bilateral partnership between the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU), and the Danish Centre for Information on Women and Gender (KVINFO), a grant-maintained selfgoverning institution under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture in Denmark.

The aim behind this project is to establish a user-friendly online database that provides access to biographical information on leading and noteworthy contemporary Lebanese women from a range of areas of expertise, including opinion leaders, senior managers, politicians, professionals, artists, and researchers.

IWSAW aims to make the Who Is She in Lebanon online database as comprehensive as possible by being thoroughly representative of the achievements of women in Lebanon. At the same time, the database will be duly selective to reflect a high level of achievement by every woman listed, depending on her field of expertise.

Accessing the Who Is She in Lebanon Online Database
The Who Is She in Lebanon online database can be accessed from anywhere in the world at:
http://whoisshe.lau.edu.lb

Using the Who Is She in Lebanon Online Database
You can browse the online database by typing the name of an expert in the search box, and then click on “search” to reveal a list of results. To view the profile of a listed expert, simply double click on her name.

If the search does not lead to any results, or to the information you want, you can proceed using one of three other alternative search modes:
1. Guided Search: To view the names of all the experts in the database.
2. Keyword Search: To search names in specific fields of expertise, professions, or organizations.
3. Alphabetic Search: To browse names of experts in alphabetical order.

Staying informed: Browsing Recently Added Profiles
To the right side of the home page of the Who Is She in Lebanon online database, users can directly view and browse the most recently added profiles.