

Sexual identity in the arab world

[Health & Medicine](#), [Sex](#)



The ways in which regimes of law, cultural identity and state governance shape understandings of Muslim or Arab sexualities are many. In his article “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World” Joseph Massad outlines some of these regimes. Massad argues that western orientalist and colonialist altered the way Muslims viewed their own sexuality by bringing into consciousness the idea of gay rights and thus homosexuality where it did not previously exist. Because of this, Massad argues that the western influence completely transformed how Muslims understood their own sexuality.

In the beginning of his article Massad points out how Arab and Iranian men would engage in both gay and heterosexual practices while simultaneously rejecting the ‘Western identity’ of gayness. While this opposes the idea of Western homosexuality it reflects an Arab understanding of sexuality as being fluid and not tightly restrained by identifying as either ‘gay’ or ‘straight.’ This changed over time as Western influence became more prevalent in the Arab world through culture exchange.

Massad refers to this cultural exchange by introducing the Gay International, a sort of missionary group who aims to ‘stabilize’ the sexual instability found within Arab societies. In other words, the Gay International aims to promote its views on sexuality and liberate Arabs into the Western world of homosexuality. This highlights how sexual identities can be created and can travel between societies through the work of individual groups. The Gay International succeeded in creating and dividing Arabs into two new forms of identity -both homo and hetero sexuality, where previously these were unfamiliar concepts.

As opposed to Western societies, Massad notes how the Arabic language only recently adopted words for homosexuality and heterosexuality. Further, the word for sexual deviance was only coined in the mid 1950 and is understood to refer to the Western concept of homosexuality. These examples of language show how Western concepts shape Muslim understandings of sexuality by introducing certain terms that reflect Western born concepts. By forcing Muslims to identify as homosexuals this placed them into a social group that could be targeted by police and government agencies.

As noted in the article, police were able to target men “ who identify as ‘ gay’ on a personal level and who seek to use this identity as a group identification... ” The labeling of Arab men as homosexuals made them vulnerable to police attacks against this ‘ socially deviant’ behavior. As a result of the introduction of Western cultural concepts of sexuality, Arab men were subsequently subject to repression by state government forces. Police targeting is not the only form of a state government’s control over sexual identity.

Because homosexuality in the Arab world was transformed from a practice into an identity this made it also subject to antihomosexual laws. The Western concepts of sexuality have thus created a new cultural identity that is regulated by law and enforced by state governments in the Arab world. Nadine Naber’s paper entitled “ Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore” highlights the conflicting identities of homo and heterosexuality while also showing how individuals deal with and combat socially constructed norms in an Arab context.

Nadine analyzes ideas about virginity and homosexuality by interviewing young women who grew up surrounded by these issues. One of Nadine's interviewees, Lulu, a gay Arab woman, describes how the connotation of homosexuality as being a Western concept was so engrained in her upbringing that she felt she could not be gay and Arab at the same time as they were such opposing identities. In Lulu's case, she was able to resist the exorcising identity of being gay in an Arab family by seeking support from queer Arab groups.

She was able to form a family with other socially ostracized women who were also shunned by the Arab belief that homosexuality is a Western born and promoted idea. By choosing these women as her 'family' Lulu is able to resist the patriarchal and heterosexual ideals of Arab culture. Lulu insists that 'queer Arabs exist' which is in itself an act of resistance against homophobic Arab understandings of sexuality. Because many Arabs view homosexuality as being created by Western culture they are able to sustain their cultural views on exuality by blaming gay identifying Arabs as being Americanized. This is one way Arabs are able to resist the Western binary form of identity as either a hetero or a homo sexual. Gay Arabs are simply non existent without American influence. In terms of the gay individuals themselves, they must also choose to resist or assimilate -or a combination of the two- into Western ideas of sexuality in order to understand their own sexual identity. In Lulu's case, she chooses to resist the 'normal' path of an Arab women -who is to remain a virgin until she is married off- by openly identifying as gay.

In the eyes of her parents she has chosen sex over her family and thus rejected her Arab family and culture. In her family's view there is no way to combine a gay identity with the socially constructed views on sexuality found in Arab culture. Lulu rebels from her family's views on Arab sexuality by embracing the identity of a gay Arab woman. Not only does Lulu rebel by identifying as gay but by doing this she simultaneously rejects the ' virgin until married' ideal bound to the heterosexual norm of Arab identity.

While Massad's work identifies the structures behind the creation of sexual identities and how these travel beyond state lines, Nadine's paper shows how these constructed sexual identities affect individual's understandings of their own identities in their every day lives. Nadine's paper gives a personal face to sexual identity issues, showing how the cultural understandings of sexual identity laid out in Massad's article effect those who are marginalized by the very dialogue that is used to define them.