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## CHAPTER 5



## Woman-Woman Love in Islamic Societies

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Women have only recently become visible at all in Islamicist/Orientalist discourse.<sup>1</sup> Within most present-day Islamic states, where representation of even married heterosexual conduct is heavily censored, woman-woman sexuality remains thoroughly submerged. What follows is a brief compilation and discussion of the evidence that does exist concerning woman-woman sexual relations in Islamic societies.

Classical treatises on sexual vice discuss tribadism (*sahq*)—from a male perspective (see Rowson 1991:63 for some unilluminating examples). There is also a tradition that women "practiced the vice [of sodomy] for forty years among the tribe of Lot before the men took it up" (Bellamy 1979:37, citing the *Dhamm al-hawā* of Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī, ca. 1116–1201). Sexual relations between women within harems has been more supposed than observed. There is an occasional dramatic report, such as that concerning the 'Abbāsīd Khalīf Musa al-Hādī who beheaded two beautiful young women from his harem who had been caught together in flagrante delicto and decorated the detached and perfumed heads with diadems (Walther 1981:118). Similarly, in a note to a story from the *Thousand and One Nights* in which a man comes upon a beloved being kissed by her maid, Richard Burton claimed that harems "are hot-beds of Sapphism and tribadism. Every woman past her first youth has a girl who she calls 'Myrtle' (in Damascus)," and he added, "Amongst the

wild Arabs [i.e., Bedouins], who ignore Socratic and Sapphic perversions, the lover is always more jealous of his beloved's girl-friends than of men rivals" (1885-88, 4:234n1).<sup>2</sup>

Ottaviano Boy, a Venetian envoy to the Ottoman court in Constantinople during the mid-sixteenth century, reported that for the "lustie and lascivious wenches" in the harem of Suleiman the Magnificent, "it is not lawfull for any one to bring ought in unto them, with which they may commit deeds of beastly uncleannesse; so that if they have a will to eate Cucumbers, they are sent in unto them sliced to deprive them of the meanes of playing the wantons" (whether singularly or with each other).<sup>3</sup>

Allen Edwardes's lurid survey of various hostile reports of other peoples' alleged customs asserts that,

isolated in enormous seraglios, females were generally given over to fanatic sapphism (sehhaueh) employing the ancient substitutes for the appeasing phallus, the tongue, candle, banana, and artificial penis. . . . [The women were] scornfully called sehheek-ehs (rubbers, fricatrices). . . . Apart from sehhaueh, various crude and euphemistic titles were granted female inversion, among them mejhool-el-izarbund (laxity of the trouser-string) and lisaun-fee-gubb (tongue in bush, cunnilingus). Most Arabs were of the opinion that women corrupt women more than men do; thus the prudent Arab was always more jealous of his sweetheart's lady friends than any suspected male admirers. . . . In the restricted harem, esh-sheykheh-el-bezzreh (one who teaches the art of rubbing clitoris against clitoris) taught every girl in the sapphic sciences. To solace her in long hours of desire for the male, nearly every concubine had her own private companion whom she styled merseeneh or reehauneh (myrtle) and with whom she practices all the sapphic pleasures. (1959:255)

Edwardes does not indicate where he found these terms and claims. The rhetoric surely had a quaint ring even in 1959, when it was published (with an introduction by that determined "curer" of homosexuality, Albert Ellis).

Herbert mentions an occasion in which the great Persian Safavid Shah 'Abbas rode "to hunt the Tygre, accompanied only with two hundred Women, his Wiues and Concubines, most of them were attired like couragious Amazons with Semiter, Bow and Arrowes" ([1626] 1971:98). He does not say whether those he called "Amazons" had sexual relations with women, men, or with no one, but "Amazon" seems a term for which heterosexual assumptions are particularly inapt.

Chebel takes the absence of mention of lesbian love in the *Qur'ān* as evidence of absence in "the traditions of primitive Islam" (and, presumably, Arabia at the time of Mohammed) (1995:314). Rowson argues that sex between women was entirely distinct from gender variance in medieval Arabic and Persian:<sup>4</sup>

Neither in al-Jurjani nor al-Raghib, nor elsewhere in the literature I have investigated, is there any suggestion that women involved in same-sex relations take on any of the nonsexual gender attributes of men; nor do we find any reference to active-passive role differentiation in lesbian relationships. There are, to be sure, occasional descriptions of women adopting masculine modes of behavior—donning male attire and swords, riding horseback, and so forth—particularly in the early (seventh and eighth) Islamic centuries, when conventions of seclusion were apparently less rigorous. Such women were sometimes admired, sometimes criticized for venturing into the public world of men; but they were never associated with any particular form of sexual irregularity [!]. Even the ghulamiyat, singing slave girls who were dressed up as boys (on occasion complete with painted mustaches) and became the rage at the caliphal court in ninth-century Baghdad, were not known for having sexual interest in or relations with other women; on the contrary, . . . they were competing with boys for the attention of men. (1991:68)

AbuKhalil reports *suhaqiyyat* as a venerable Arabic term for "self-declared lesbian" and notes that much of the poetry of the Arab Sappho, Walladah bint al-Mustakfi, "in praise of her female lover poetess Muhjah was lost because most authors refused to cite them due to their explicit sexual language" (1993:33). He goes on to assert:

There are episodes in the turath in which men tolerated lesbian love. One man was told that his wife was tusahiq (having sex with other women), and he responded: "As long as she frees me from any sexual obligation towards her, let her do what she wants." One poetess declared: "I drank wine for love of flirting/and I shifted towards lesbianism for fear of pregnancy." (p. 34)

Sharif al-Idrisi (1100-66) attributes woman-woman relations to choice rather than to the lack or infrequent availability of male sexual partners, that is, so-called "situational homosexuality":

There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so that they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and their voice. Such women would like to be the active partner, and they would like to be superior to the man who makes this possible for them. Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces whom she desires. If she has no inclination, he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men and brings her to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, Koran readers, and female scholars. (*Kitab muzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq*, in Walther 1981:118)

Busbecq asserted that some Turkish men refused to let their wives go to the women's baths because of the reputation for lesbian activities (1744 [1562]:146).

More common than these glimmers of women choosing women are interpretations (native and alien) of women driven into each others' embraces by the lack of male sexual partners. Campbell (1949) cites an Iraqi view that harem girls kiss and make love to each other from sadness of heart. The extent to which this reflects male fantasies or female realities is impossible to distinguish. (See Figure 5.1.) As Southgate notes, "Whether coy or indifferent, male poets and writers kept silent about lesbian practices" (1984:438). Especially since women did not leave records of their behaviors or feelings, we cannot take absence of literary evidence as evidence of absence.<sup>5</sup> Male suppositions and fears of woman-woman sexuality within Islamic societies along with hostility toward Islamic societies from Europeans writing about harems' reputations for lesbianism make it difficult to interpret (the usually terse) statements about "Sapphic vice." Westphal-Hellbusch's discussion of South Arabian transvestite/homosexual dancers (in chapter 15) is similarly less than clear:

Women transvestites constitute a social phenomenon of much greater import. Such women, either for the whole or part of their lives, lead a male existence, giving outward expression to this change of role by donning male attire. They cannot, however, attain the legal status of a male and do not engage in sexual activities with members of either sex. (1956:137)

Then there is Chebel's reference to Ester Panetta's sensational report at a 1948 international congress of orientalists describing a women's milieu in Benghazi, Libya in which women "offered themselves in a lascivious delirium to demons of two sexes: incubuses, but, seemingly more often, succubuses. Moreover, their incantations to djenoun were equally offered at weddings 'where after the consummation of the marriage, the friends of the bride passed a lascivious night with a woman, usually a male-dressed courtesan'" (1988:47; my translation).

The passing comment by Feuerstein and al-Marzooq that "lesbianism is presumably rare, although we have reliable evidence for its existence in [Muscat,] Oman" is not much more helpful (1978:666). Nor does it contradict Wikan's statement that "no social role involving lesbian relationships is found or accepted in Sohar." She acknowledges that it would be "silly to declare that sexual relations have never ever taken place between two [Sohari] women" (1978:474)—that is, attestation of female-female sexual behavior is insufficient to establish that there is a recognized role or identity. And, although the Human Relations Area Files keyed Ingrams's (1938) mention of a Hadramaut (i.e., from southeastern Arabia, east of Aden) woman who dressed as a man



5.1 Women with dildo, seventeenth-century Mughal. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

(which included wearing a dagger), under the classification "homosexuality," what Ingrams wrote did not disclose anything of the woman's sexual habits. In her chapter in this volume Dickemann discusses the lack of clarity about gender and sexuality of Balkan women socially accepted as men in both native views and external observers' attempts to analyze what appears to me to be a gender-crossing role. In discussing dervish organization, Bliss mentions "the only maids in Islam are female dervishes. One lives at 'Ain Ka'rim, near Jerusalem, known as Bint-esh-Sheikh, or the sheikh's daughter" (1912:254). Given the centrality of childbearing to the Arab woman's role, this might be seen as a departure from their gender, although Bliss goes out of his way to note that women are "held by the fellahin to incarnate many of the attributes of holiness which should distinguish a dervish: she does not bear arms, she suffers beatings, she serves others" (254).

The inability of Yemenis to conceive that a young African-American anthropologist accompanied by her older white lover were not daughter and mother, as Delores Walters relates, suggests acute denial or the lack of any conception of ongoing and preferential female-female sexuality. According to Walters:

In Yemen, decorum regarding sexual behavior is more crucial than the behavior itself. Since we lived in a small village shack that afforded us little privacy, our lesbian relationship was probably not a secret. As in other situations of non-conformity to sexual mores, such as adultery for example, a woman's friends and neighbors will protect the participants if the illicit relationship is carried out with discretion. On the other hand, it was possible that some people easily avoided acknowledging the reality of my lesbian partnership. (1991:45-46)

What Baraheni wrote could be generalized westward to Arab societies as well: "Female homosexuality in Iran is hushed up in such a way that no woman, in the whole of Iranian history, has been allowed to speak out for such tendencies. . . . To attest to lesbian desires would be an unforgivable crime" (1977:47-48). Note his stress on repression of any affirmation or self-representation: not that it does not exist but that it cannot be spoken of, and, especially, not written about. Although Fernea (1965), el-Messiri (1978), Nelson (1974), and Wikan (1980, 1982) have revealed an extensive women's culture in the homosocial Arab women's sphere—and shown that ethnography of women's worlds in these patriarchal societies is possible—female ethnographers have, so far, been unwilling (or constrained) to write about female-female sexuality in Arab or in other Muslim societies. Beyond the paltry references cited here, there is nothing in the way of published ethnographic literature on "lesbians" in Islamic societies to discuss at this point in time.

## Notes

1. The most important of the pioneering collections are Fernea and Bezirgan (1977) and Beck and Keddie (1978), the former more experiential, the latter more analytical. See Nelson on earlier anthropological work, in which women were more visible than in the study of written texts that is characteristic of "Orientalism" as a field of study (1974). On the history of conceptions of women in Islamic societies, see Abu-Lughod (1990), Ahmed (1986, 1992), Mahloul-Obermeyer (1992, 1995), Ong (1990), and Stowasser (1987) discuss some of the variety of current conceptions.

2. Between these two quotations, he mentions that "at Agbome, capital of Dahome, I found that a troop of women was kept for the use of the 'Amazons.'" What he published about these troops in his report of that mission (Burton 1864:ii, 73) treated them as wives of the Dahomean king and does not provide any indication of woman-woman amours among the "Amazons." Edwardes claims that in harems murder by poison or strangulation was prevalent "because of rabid lesbian rivalry and infidelity, as one girl enticed or stole another's companion" (1959:256).

3. Quoted by Barber (1973:35).

4. One exception is Jinan, the ghulamiyya for whom Abū Nuwās expressed love. As I discuss in more detail in "The will not to know," the ghulamiyyat fashion was launched by Zubayda, mother of Abū Nuwās's patron, Khalif al-Amin, to get him away from exclusively loving boys. It seems to have worked briefly on Abū Nuwās as well.

5. The absence of evidence may not have always been the case. In a paragraph in his *liwāt* entry to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (which Schmitt chose to cut in Schmitt and Sofer 1992:155; see note 163n27), Pellat referred to "a dozen love romances with female names in their title" listed in Ibn al-Nadim's *Kitab Hind wa-bint al-Nu'man* (1983:777). There are also terms for woman-woman relations, including *sahq*, *sihaq*, and *musahaqah*, and, in Arabic, *tassahouq*. The root common to these terms (and to the nominalization of a person: *sahhāqu*) means grinding. "Lesbianism is *anamika* in South Asian [Hindu/Urdu], without/beyond name. . . . This is a subculture produced publicly as ghost, namelessness, passivity and silence," according to Fernando (1995:23).

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## PART II



## Literary Studies