

Love, Seduction and Gender: Ethnographic and Literary Perspectives

Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies

Tuesday 13 and Wednesday 14 September 2011

Organisation: Corinne Fortier, Aymon Kreil, Samuli Schielke

Love and seduction have often been neglected when studying gender dynamics in Muslim-majority countries. While much research has been conducted on male domination, female agency, and their relation to religious and social norms, the complex role of love and seduction has been largely neglected although they belong to core situations for the performance of gender. This absence is especially striking given the fact that both in present and past times, love and seduction have been a major preoccupation in the lives of people north and south of Sahara, east and west of the Levant, and well documented in poetry and prose. While undeniably embedded in gendered relations of power, love and seduction are a highly ambivalent field of experience that involves a good deal of negotiation between partners and sometimes with their families, and which may stand in a tense relationship to ideals of patriarchal domination. This panel tries to give an account of the possible developments, tensions and dynamics involved in love and seduction in both past and present. Including ethnographic, historical, and literary approaches and a broad geographical area including but not restricted to the Middle East, North Africa and the countries of the Sahel, the symposium intends to enrich the reflexion about the role of emotions and passions in social and religious experience.

We would like to scrutinise especially the following problematics:

- How are paradigms of love evolving through time? How do the models of and for romance develop and/or persist between, for example, Between antique old *ghazal* poetry, Umm Kalthum's songs or Valentine's Day text messages? What are the discourses and metaphors of love people have access to?
- What are the places and sites where love and seduction be performed? Furthermore, what are the cultural and social settings where love and seduction are expressed? How can the impact of Internet be evaluated in these matters?
- What kind of gender relations are involved in seductive and romantic encounters when women and men do not have the same options to express their affection? And how do these encounters interact with social and religious norms like gender segregation, kinship and alliance?
- How do ideas and experiences of romantic love influence vernacular understandings of personhood and morality? What kind of a loving subject, what kind of social relations are involved in love in different Muslim societies?

Programme

Monday, 13 September

Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMC)

Altensteinstraße 48, 14195 Berlin (Dahlem)

10:00

Introduction and welcome (Corinne Fortier, Aymon Kreil, Samuli Schielke)

10:30–11:30: Love, desire, and sexuality.

Desire in Mahmoud Darwish's Palestine (Prem Poddar)

Seduction, Love and Gender in Mauritania (Corinne Fortier)

11:30–12:00 coffee break

12:00–13: Identity, gender and generation

Become What You Are: Some Thoughts About the Recourse to *Fitrah* in Contemporary Discourses
(Lorenz Nigst)

"Gayted" Communities – Marginalized Masculinities in Lebanon. (Erica Li Lundqvist)

13–14:30 Lunch

14:30–15:30: Talking about love

The Art of Playing 'Tuql' – How to 'Make love' in Egypt (Steffen Strohmenger)

The Bragging and Confessing: How to Talk About Love in Cairo (Aymon Kreil)

15:30–16:00 coffee break

16–17:00: Subjectivity

Love, Eroticism and the seduction of "sexuality": An anthropological account from Morocco (Gianfranco Rebutini)

Majnun and Valentine: Troubles of love in Egypt (Samuli Schielke)

Tuesday, 14 September

(Venue to be announced)

10:00– **Concluding session and brunch**

Abstracts:

Desire in Mahmoud Darwish's Palestine

Prem Poddar

Best known for his political poems ('breath of the Palestinian people') with *watan* (his 'country of words'), exile and belonging as central motifs, Mahmoud Darwish also penned furiously personal love poems that can be read apolitically. However, Darwish himself declared this of his first collection entirely devoted to love, *A Bed for the Stranger* (1998): "If I write love poems, I resist the conditions that don't allow me to write love poems". A distinct narrative is difficult to disentangle in his poetry in that the exile's desires, doubts, dreams, and anguish deliberately fuse the private with the public. Taking the 'side of love and not war', he deploys typical conventions of Arab erotic literature in his Rita poems --"For two years my forearm was her pillow"-- written to one of his many Israeli-Jewish lovers. Scandalous, sentimental, sensual and seductive as many of his poems are, they chart a wide range of emotions that project desire and passion powerfully while betraying a sensibility that is uncompromising. My paper will delineate some of the issues raised by his poetic output.

Seduction, Love and Gender in Mauritania

Corinne Fortier

Men of Moorish society of Mauritania had a courtesy code inspired of the Arab chivalry which expressed itself particularly in love relationship. The man gave himself to the woman through poems inspired by his muse, through night visits with thousands of peril, and through a variety of sumptuous gifts. Rivalry with other young men in the conquest of a woman, as well as courage, tenacity and generosity he had to demonstrate are initiation proofs to surmount. Women are the object of the desire of men, desire that he learned to discipline by his courtship itself. Proofs of love are also proofs of virility.

Become What You Are: Some Thoughts About the Recourse to *Fitrah* in Contemporary Discourses

Lorenz Nigst

During the course of my work on the “boyat”-phenomenon of the Gulf states (i.e. “cross-dressing” girls), it has become clear to me that a conspicuous feature of many texts and statements is their reference to the (Islamic) concept of “fitrah.” A screening of a larger body of source material suggests that this recourse to “fitrah” is all but fortuitous, but takes place in respect of momentous social cultural change, and regularly touches upon such topics as “gender”, “homosexuality”, “feminism”, etc. I am contending that the --not always identical-- recourse to “fitrah” must be taken into consideration, if we wish to comprehend an important thrust of contemporary discourses. During the course of my presentation, I will present a part of my work in progress and try to formulate some hypotheses as to why this recourse to “fitrah” “makes sense.”

“Gayted” Communities – Marginalized Masculinities in Lebanon Seduction

Erica Li Lundqvist

Gays (and lesbians) have through out the history, in all corners of the world, learned to exist in an often-hostile hetero normative dominant culture. They negotiate their existence in this environment through the construction of subcultures that coexist within the hetero normative culture. Stigmatized and oppressed they try to resist, reinterpret, and recode the social and religious conventions they find around them.

This paper will partly focus on the strategies Muslim gays in Lebanon develop to manage and create a positive correlation between their religious identity and their sexual orientation combined with an examination on how a gay identity is acquired, verified and played out in Lebanon, especially within the Gay community exploring the role of masculinity, the importance, or lack thereof in the shaping of Muslim gay identity.

The Bragging and Confessing: How to Talk About Love in Cairo

Aymon Kreil

This contribution seeks to frame the moments and places to talk about love and sex in Cairo, each time involving different ways to express one’s deeds and feelings. It will permit to discuss the notions of public and private as they appear in my respondent’s talk. Public expressions about love and sex among men imply generally often an open distance toward feelings and the assertion of one’s sexual potency or alternatively a moralist tone. In coffee shop conversations, marriage appears mostly as a burden. On the other hand, times for confidences are valued, either among close friends, or with the beloved one. As romanticism, they are often described as marks of education and seen as recent changings. Beside, counselling centres promote psychology as a mean to break “the silence on sexuality” among Egyptians. Members see their action as directed mainly toward the uneducated under-classes. By this way, the expression of feelings, education and progress become intricate and redefine the realms of legitimate talking.

The Art of Playing 'Tuql' – How to 'Make love' in Egypt

Steffen Strohmenger

Presenting material from my field research on the ideas of young Egyptian men and women on love the paper will elaborate on the concept of ‘tuql’ – the art of ‘playing hard to get’. Constituting a much cherished cultural model of behaviour, which foremost women are expected to perform, the different functional and gendered roles ‘tuql’ plays in the coming about of a mutual love relationship will be discussed. It will be shown that the concept of ‘tuql’ serves as a rhetorical strategy which allows – for

women and men alike – to prove one’s quality as somebody worth to be loved. Like this it represents a discursive mechanism of ‘de-paradoxation’ to meet the cultural expectation that when loving somebody s/he must not be loved yet. However, and seemingly coming more from the female side, voices can be heard that would consider ‘tuql’, as informants put it, not to be “a very healthy thing”, wishing “they would just tell each other about their feelings openly and frankly. It would save time, instead of wasting the time. What do you think?”

Love, Eroticism and the seduction of “sexuality”: An anthropological account from Morocco

Gianfranco Rebutini

Recent studies have examined the different positions of acts and identities in the analysis of male homoeroticism in *Islamicate* world. For a comprehension of affectivity, eroticism and love between men in Morocco, I would suggest that, despite their strong seduction, Western categories like “homosexuality” “heterosexuality”, and more in general all the Western criteria defining “sexuality”, are to some extent a red herring. Making use of in-depth data of participant observation among men in Marrakech, my contribution focuses particularly on the difference between local erotic behaviors and practices, and global sexual identities. Although I suggest a present-day anthropological analysis in the context of globalization, this difference could be also understood through Foucauldian historical distinction concerning *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*. Thus, my aim is to demonstrate that definitional criteria of sexual identification and of erotic acts and practices are always situational and relational.

Majnun and Valentine: Troubles of love in Egypt

Samuli Schielke

In my presentation I look at romantic love as a modality for imagining and speaking about morality, subjectivity, and relations between people in northern Egypt. A striking feature of the social imaginary of love in contemporary Egypt is the union of unfulfilled romantic obsession with ideals of monogamous love marriage. By virtue of its valorization of immersion in passion and of making major decisions on emotional grounds, love is not easily reconciled with prevailing religious, social, and political ideologies emphasizing discipline, respect, and reason. While not new, such contradictions have intensified considerably over the past few decades given the context of the Islamic revival and new forms of youth culture. The social imaginary of love and related culture or romance among young Egyptians is a highly eclectic product of various traditions that incorporate a classical Arabic tradition of impossible love with its paradigmatic love-sick hero Majnun, the melodrama of Arab soap operas, Hollywood romance, Valentine’s Day, and modernist ideals of the monogamous nuclear family. In my presentation, I analyse the ways young people appropriate, consume, and employ the social imaginary of love to make sense of their frequently contradictory experiences, often with troubling outcomes.