



Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World

Shereen El Feki

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****Kirkus Best Books of the Year (2013)****

If you really want to know a people, start by looking inside their bedrooms.

As political change sweeps the streets and squares, the parliaments and presidential palaces of the Arab world, Shereen El Feki has been looking at an upheaval a little closer to home—in the sexual lives of men and women in Egypt and across the region. The result is an informative, insightful, and engaging account of a highly sensitive and still largely secret aspect of Arab society.

Sex is entwined in religion, tradition, politics, economics, and culture, so it is the perfect lens through which to examine the complex social landscape of the Arab world. From pregnant virgins to desperate housewives, from fearless activists to religious firebrands, from sex work to same-sex relations, *Sex and the Citadel* takes a fresh look at the sexual history of the region and brings new voices to the debate over its future.

This is no peep show or academic treatise but a highly personal and often humorous account of one woman's journey to better understand Arab society at its most intimate and, in the process, to better understand her own origins. Rich with five years of groundbreaking research, *Sex and the Citadel* gives us a unique and timely understanding of everyday lives in a part of the world that is changing before our eyes.

Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World Details

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From Reader Review Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World for online ebook

Lyana Khairuddin says

Sheeren El Feki got there first!!!

That was my first thought after about a quarter into the book. This was the book I wanted to write about my own experience of next to no sexual education in Malaysia to being a researcher in HPV and now HIV- two sexually transmitted viruses, and the former being so close to women that I am appalled at the fact that I only knew of it when I was studying to write my PhD proposal at the ripe old age of 23. I found similarities between Sheeren and myself, she being an Immunologist before working as a journalist for The Economist, working closely with UNAIDS and well-read in HIV. The fact that she was brought up as third culture kid, however, was our difference- I grew up much like many of the subjects in the book- conservative, family-first and my parents were born-again Muslims; ensuring the double-stigma of culture and religion towards the already taboo subject of sex.

All of that aside, for as a reader one reads based on one's own experiences- the book is articulate, well-researched (the notes and references takes about a quarter of the thickness!- and one that makes us all glad for researchers who have done their homework first), and presents arguments with a researcher's viewpoint of qualitative and quantitative data- almost neutral, and allowing the data to speak for itself. Nonetheless, like all closing paragraphs to summarise any scientific publication- the last chapter presents the author's own summary of the issue and the hope for future work that can be done.

I guess us scientists are all molded from similar templates after all.

I also can't help but feel a sense of familiarity with the situations described in Egypt and the Arab world- almost as if Malaysia is heading towards the same direction if we are not there already. This book used "sex" as a topic to discuss a bigger psychosocial analysis of religion, society and culture; something us HIV scientists will be familiar with- for we cannot talk about the transmission or research towards a cure or vaccination without talking about behaviour and ideologies. While the book focusses heavily on sexuality- there are only a few chapters solely dedicated to men who have sex with men, lesbians and transgenders. The primary focus of the book dissects the culture of marriage- from expectations, family, reproduction, to sex of course; and mainly on the effects of a patriarchal culture on women in general.

The chapters tend to get a bit technical and anecdotal; but almost always will begin or injected with humourous stories, for I guess in most cultures, when talking about something that is taboo, making jokes of it is the first step towards our freedom to express and to start a discourse. Ah satire, how some people can take such a skewed view towards you!

This book should be considered a thesis. And for that, I thank Shereen El Feki for writing it and I am jealous that she had the idea first!

Oh well, I guess I just need to find my own book to write. :)

Nonetheless, a good read for both the curious reader who not only wants to delve into the topic of sexuality, but also a background almost of the Arab Spring and the revolution that follows it. Not a light read and one that requires a little bit of science background, although not heavy enough to make one dependent on pubmed-wiki. Social scientists will find this book a great companion, I think.

Yomna hosny says

This is an extremely brave work of literature. More often than not, people would rather pretend that difficult topics don't exist than expose raw emotionality of any kind.

Mandy says

Author Shereen El Feki has written an informative, insightful and extremely readable account of sex in Arab society, a largely hidden and often misunderstood aspect of life in the Muslim world. The area is shrouded in mystery and secrecy and is inevitably a sensitive area to probe into. By using real contexts and situations, and by referring to sexuality in the region throughout history, this accessible sociological examination of all aspects of sexual attitudes and practices opens up a world rarely looked into before. Shereen El Feki met and talked to all sorts of women – young and old, married, single and divorced, housewives and career women, mothers and daughters. She met too with a similar range of men. She talked with people from all walks of life, rich and poor, doctors and academics, teachers and clerics. She presents the reader with a myriad of personal stories plus a range of official and unofficial information and statistics.

With an impressive bibliography, many pages of notes, and an accompanying website where people can not only find out more but contribute their own thoughts and experiences, this is a really ground-breaking book, timely, thoughtful, sometimes upsetting, sometimes humorous, and of considerable importance and relevance to those both in the east and their western counterparts.

Greengambit says

I have spent time living in and working across the Arab world, and **Sex and the Citadel** certainly deserves the rave reviews (see sexandthecitadel.com) that it has been getting around the world. It is balanced and informative without being preachy or Orientalist. Her background with one foot in the Arab world and one foot in the West shines through; it is also just a lot of fun to read.

Shereen also gave an inspiring presentation of her book to a packed auditorium at the Hay-on-Wye book festival!

Wilbur says

A well intentioned work. More appropriate if it were condensed and published as an extensive article, not really book length. Frequently repetitive and tedious.

Karen.s says

Shereen Feki, the daughter of an Egyptian man and a Welsh mother, looks at the connection between the expression of sexuality and the pursuit of freedom in general. She argues that Muslims were not always so sexually suppressed as they are today, but that the tyranny of dictatorship has used sexual repression within the patriarchal Middle Eastern societies as the most powerful tool of general suppression in their regimes. With all the changes that Middle Eastern societies have been going through in the Arab Spring uprisings, Feki wanted to see what changes, if any, are taking place in regards to sexuality. She looks at women's sexual rights, the importance of virginity, sex workers, homosexuality and transgender. She concentrates mostly on Egypt, but looks at some issues in Morocco, Lebanon and Tunisia as well.

Feki was born and raised in Canada, but spent summers with her relatives in Egypt. In a way, this book is an attempt to understand her roots and get to know her relatives better. These parts, where she has real discussions with friends and relatives are most interesting and revealing. She also talks to famous feminists, activists, authors and film makers, and while these people often provide the most shocking information, the tone is different than talking to family. I found it a little jarring. On the other hand, I was inspired and genuinely happy to know about these stereotype busting women. My personal reading list has a few more titles added to it.

This book is meant to be read by the general public and thus does not employ academic language. I would call it "kicky". The language is easily accessible and she occasionally uses crude words and makes jokes. However, the content of the book is scholarly. At times I felt there was an attempt being made to make the book more appealing to the reader by quoting extended passages from explicit texts that bordered on sensationalizing. Feki's point is to show how uninhibited Arabs and Muslims used to be, but one or two references would have been enough. If you are looking for a more scholarly take on the same material, albeit describing Egypt in the 70s, read Nawal Sadaawi's "The Faces of Eve". The last chapter of the book contains suggestions of plans of action that Feki, as an employee of the World Health Organization, would like to pursue. It reads like a position paper presented to such an organization. It's not that there's anything wrong with that, but it was such a shift from the tones previously used.

I do think the topic is a worthy one for discussion and I would like to see more books on this subject looking at the situation in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states or the Arabs living in Israel. I would recommend the book for anyone who is interested and hasn't read anything on the subject.

I

Mostafa says

Terribly sensationalized and reads more like an article than an informative book. The title is also misleading since it's actually more about egyptian women than about sexuality and sexual culture in the arab world. I enjoyed reading it for the first 100 pages but it's basically a bland field report targeted to the west.

Elaine says

A good background for anyone who wants to know more about women's lives in Egypt. Though the book takes on the overwhelming task of sex in the Arab world, Egypt is where we spend most of our time and the side trips to other countries are basically flyovers. Will go into more detail later - I think though I rated this book a 3 rather than a 4 as I would have liked to hear more personal narratives and in-depth focus on any of the fascinating topics the book covers, but that is my idiosyncrasy. There is also the sad fact that El Feki looks so much to the Egyptian Spring as a chance for change for women and for more openness in society generally but we know how that has ended, at least for now.

Emanuel Ramos says

Interesting look at sexuality in the Arab world. The book, for me, loses steam in the end. It's just so dense. So I can't totally recommend it, unless you're drawn to these sorts of topics. Or if you're a fan of The Economist.

???? ????? says

It is a great book that covers all aspects of the sexuality of the Arab world. It is pretty much comprehensive and says what is needed to be said. Shereen's writing style is entertaining, she is eloquent and precise, which makes the reading experience more rewarding.

It is sad that there is no Arabic edition of this book that it out yet. This is a much needed discourse in the Arab world. Hope it picks up in the Arab world, where it is needed mostly.

Rebecca says

I listened to Shereen El-Feki being interviewed on Fresh Air a few months ago and immediately put my name on the library waiting list that already had developed for this book. Sex and gender relations within the Arab/Muslim world has been sort of my pet academic interest during college, and I was INCREDIBLY excited to read a nuanced survey of the subject, especially post the Arab Spring.

I wasn't disappointed by the book at all. El-Feki's interviews are taking place during a unique time of upheaval in Egypt and the Arab world at large and capture the diverse opinions of individuals throughout the Arab world. Her thesis is somewhat subtle, but revolutionary: that the political uprisings of the Arab Spring are intrinsically linked to a longer and more intimate kind of a revolution, sustained assault on "traditional" sex and gender norms. However, with the rise in power of conservative Islamists, it doesn't necessarily follow that this sexual revolution will be successful and even if it is, it may not adhere to Western notions of what a successful sexual revolution would look like. Whatever the endpoint may be, El-Feki makes a convincing case that Arab society is in for a period of sustained change.

4ZZZ Book Club says

We were joined by Shereen El Feki to talk about the impact of religion, the nature of virginity and the convenience of 'pleasure marriages'. Originally broadcast on 21/03/2013, the podcast is available at zedbookclub.com.

Shereen El Feki is a writer, broadcaster and academic. She began her professional life with a doctorate in molecular immunology before going on to become an award-winning journalist with *The Economist* and a presenter with Al Jazeera English. She is the former vice-chair of the United Nation's Global Commission on HIV and the Law and is a TED Global Fellow.

Raised in Canada, Shereen is the child of Welsh and Egyptian parents and would visit her Egyptian family yearly as a child. As an adult, working with *The Economist* she was drawn to the surprisingly low HIV infection rate that was being reported in the Arab region. But as she began to dig deeper, particularly in the country of her family, she found a gap between official figures and private reality.

Shereen has spent the last 5 years traveling throughout the Arab region, with a particular focus on Egypt, looking into sex and sexuality in that world. Marriage, pre-marital sex, gay relationships, even basic education all come under in the microscope in her book *Sex and the Citadel*.

Bookworm says

A mixed bag. I had been eager to read this after spotting it at the bookstore. El Feki has a hilarious introduction about discussing sex toys with some women and that had me hooked. Throughout the book she discusses different aspects of sexuality, gender and gender roles and other issues. However, the book is slightly misnamed. It's not really about those topics in the Arab world, as El Feki looks through the topics with the frame of Egypt and the Arab Spring specifically in Egypt, rather than across the region. Other countries do get some focus, but Egypt is her main focus.

However, the book is still a very interesting read. The author discusses marital relations, adultery, LGBT issues, dating, courtship, prostitution, etc. in various chapters. Unsurprisingly, much of what I read could easily have taken place in more conservative parts of the United States: from the lack of sex education to the strict guidelines for dating to struggle for some who are gay and lesbian. "Conversion" therapy is apparently practiced in Arab countries as well, which surprised me to read about but in retrospect really shouldn't have.

Yet I found the book occasionally a struggle to get through. I feel like the author tried to tackle a bit too much at once: viewing intimacy through what people in majority Muslim countries do and especially with what the Arab Spring brought for people. However, the book is not a political one and the Arab Spring is backdrop to her work. The book is occasionally very academic and dry reading, but sometimes has some great/interesting/moving/sad anecdotes and stories from people who discuss various aspects of their stories to El Feki. Islam itself isn't certainly hammered over the reader's head: the Koran is quoted occasionally, but the author makes no judgements, other than providing what the Koran might say about particular situations.

The topic was really fascinating, but I couldn't help but feel disappointed with the end product. However, I think it's a really interesting read and people who have any sort of interest in Islam or sexuality or LGBT issues might want to take a look. The stories and anecdotes also aren't very lurid or titillating. If anything, I got second-hand embarrassment at some of the awkward situations (the sex toy story is probably a good example) and clear lack of sex education in some of the anecdotes.

Check it out from the library to see if you want to buy. Might be a good reference for an essay/paper/article.

Toon says

I was at first very excited to hear about this book, as little has been written on the topic. Unfortunately I found this book has many flaws. It should have been called "Intimate Muslim Women's Life in a Changing Egypt: My Personal Journey". Clearly, the scope of the book is too ambitious for several reasons:

I feel this book is much more about women's sexuality than men, presumably because the author is female which gives her easier access to women. This would have not been possible for a male author. It might also have been difficult for a female author to discuss sexuality with heterosexual Arab males. Furthermore, the book focusses mostly on Egypt. Countries that are hardly or not mentioned at all: Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others. Which does not have to be bad, except that I wish she would not give the impression this book encompasses the whole Arab world. It does not. Her argument to focus on Egypt is pretty fair, as it is the most populous and culturally most influential Arab country. However, when it comes to sexuality, Egypt could hardly be called a leading country. On the contrary: if one looks at the past 40 years, one sees the Gulf countries have had a huge influence on Egyptian society's stance toward sexuality. Tunisia enjoys the most liberal laws on prostitution in the whole region, Morocco is miles ahead when it comes to abortion, and Beirut is the gay capital of the Arab World. Where does that leave Egypt? It might be problematic to focus that much on Egyptian society while leaving other countries out. The book certainly leaves the reader with a lot of questions on sexual experience in the other Arab countries. I would have loved to read more about Saudi Arabia for instance.

Then there is the issue of Islam and sexuality. The author defines herself as a Muslim with a strong faith. Nothing wrong with that, but one should be warned that the book is written from a Muslim's point of view. This means that the book does not have a grain of criticism towards Islam or religion in general. Her claim is that Islam is not the problem: it is the solution. I cannot help to be reminded of the old Muslim Brotherhood slogan 'Al Islam Howa al Hal'. El Feki's arguments that Islam is actually very open when it comes to sex are not very convincing: 1. El Feki claims that Islam was supposed to have a liberal age when it comes to sex, from the 7-12th century. El Feki mentions several examples which supposedly show an Islam from 10 centuries ago, open towards sexuality, such as an 11th century-book called 'Encyclopedia of Pleasure' (Baghdad) as well as some women cross-dressing in the courts of Baghdad in the 11th century. But these are just some isolated examples, it is not convincing that these are representative of a society as a whole. 2. El Feki claims the Arab World's closeness was brought about by Christian closed-minded stance towards sexuality from the 19th century and onwards. Partially true, but here she attributes the decline in sexual openness to colonialism. It is too easy really to accuse the West of having invoked a change in Islamic societies from an open, liberal society to a closed one. Also, Islamic society went downhill long before Napoleon arrived in Egypt. 3. People in the Arab world became less open about sex because they live in repressive dictatorships. The sixties was a golden age for Egypt and pan-Arabism and Egyptian society was much more open back then. Dictatorship in Egypt, since the death of Nasser in 1970, only spanned one or two generations, while openness in sexuality has been in decline since for several centuries. 4. El Feki then claims Arab societies went from open to closed due to an incorrect interpretation of Islam. In her view, Islam is actually very open when it comes to sex, and liberal, but scholars interpret the Quran incorrectly. She hereby dismisses most Islamic scholars in a single step, which is brave but almost laughable.

This is the trouble with the book. It does not find any faults with religion and Islam in particular. To illustrate: at the beginning of the book, El Feki applauds a work by Tunisian author Abdelwahab Bouhdiba: "Sexuality in Islam" (1975), in which the author claims there was a flowering of sexuality in the golden age of Islam (7-12th century). Indeed the book says "One cannot deny the fundamental 'hedonism' of the

Quran". However, what she fails to mention at all is that the book also sheds some light on the dark sides of Islam: "Islam offers the widest possible view of incest", "Male supremacy is fundamental in Islam", "Islam remains violently hostile to all other ways of realizing sexual desire...the divine curse embraces both the boyish woman and the effeminate man, male and female homophilia, auto-eroticism, zoophilia, etc ...Sexual deviation is a revolt against God" and "he Christian will be a-sexual in paradise, whereas the Muslim will experience infinite orgasm". El-Feki is, in her own words, a muslim with a strong faith, but very selective as this example shows. She has an - almost naive - faith in a very liberal Islam. However the problem is that such an Islam has not been invented yet, except for the odd gay mosques in the US or in France. Sure, religion has been misused by politicians and clerics to assert their power, and the non-liberal reading of sexual matters in the Quran is a tool to curb people's sexuality, which in its turn is a way of suppressing people. But to attribute it only to an incorrect reading the Quran is naive. How does El Feki expect women in Egypt to experience a more open sexuality when most people in Egypt adhere to the view of Islam that male supremacy is fundamental? What about the huge amount of hypocrisy in Islamic societies - which can be attributed to the culture of shame and honor? Despite all of this, El Feki does not offer any a single criticism of Islam. "It's all a matter of interpretation..."

The book went downhill from the chapter on queer life in the Arab World. El Feki discusses shortly the Quran verses and hadiths which supposedly condemn homosexuality. However she does not succeed in making Islam compatible with homosexuality. She does not have to, but again she offers no criticism of Islam and does her very best to give the reader the idea that LGBTs can be perfectly accommodated within Islam, even though all clerics she interviewed agreed that homosexuality is haram. She gives the impression that LGBTs in Egypt have no desire to kiss or hold hands in public, because "it is an Islamic country" and they do not wish to change the conservative mood of society. Again it is very naive to believe that LGBTs in Egypt, unlike in Western countries, would never want to be accepted in public. Is that the sexual openness Islam offers? She stabs the Arab LGBT movement in the back, whose people are tortured and mistreated in every way - most of the time in the name of religion - by mentioning an anecdote of a girl who is questioned about the veil she wears while going to underground parties in Beirut. El Feki fails to see that, having been mistreated for decennia, it can be hard for someone not to be suspicious of someone openly proclaiming adherence to a religion so unapproving of anyone who does not fall within the heterosexual norm. But hey, it is all a matter of interpretation...

Closely entangled with her faith Islam, El Feki mostly ignores Christians and other religions in the Arab World, although it would be very interesting to touch upon them, as they hold a special position as the only substantial non-Islamic minority in the Arab world. Even though El Feki does mention some Arab Christians, she does not go into the Christian religion and its stance towards sexuality at all. She fails to make a connection between Beirut as the most sexually liberal city of the Middle East and the fact that it is the capital of a - albeit now formerly - Christian state, with strong ties to France and the Western world. Next to that, I would have been interested to read more about the interaction between Arabs and Jews in Israeli society. She only touches upon this subject briefly, but I feel that Israel holds a special position in the Arab world, as this is one of the few places where Arab people get into direct contact with a liberal and open society. Yet this topic is hardly discussed. Furthermore, El Feki fails to mention secular, atheist Arabs. After having read this book, one would say that the whole Arab world seems sexually frustrated, but I have met a lot of people who are much more open towards sexuality than the people in this book. However, all of them are secular and most of them openly atheist. These people have not been given any voice. Today I was having a conversation with some of my Syrian friends who like to show (Western) movies to a public audience. They recalled how some people in the audience would hold their hands in front of their eyes whenever a couple would kiss on screen. However, my friends who were showing the movie found this behavior ridiculous to such an extent that they asked those "prude" people to actually leave. These friends of mine are average low-class people and have never been outside of the Arab World, yet they hold some very liberal and open views towards sexuality. These kind of people are not mentioned at all in El Feki's book. While reading the chapter on gay life, I was surprised to read only about devout Muslim gays, while most LGBTs I met in Arab countries actually denounced religion as it is not accepting of homosexuality. She fails

to mention any people who lost faith in religion, even though the figure among LGBTs in the Middle East is very high. In my eyes, this makes her book biased, towards Islam. I would almost accuse her of orientalism, as for her, Islam and the Arab World seem to be the same side of a coin. It's not. Not always.

El Feki argues that the LGBT movement in Egypt can learn from the Global South. She cites Latin-America and India as examples. However, Latin-America is a rapidly secularizing Christian continent, while India is a Hindu-society with no fixed scripture/holy book comparable to the Quran or Bible - and Hindu society has always been more open when it comes to sex. It is hard too see how Arab countries could learn from these regions, unless they would push Islam out of the public sphere.

Nonetheless, with all its faults, the strength of this book is the fact that it is one of the few books to touch upon the subject of sexuality in the Arab World. That alone would make it worth while to read. And I do think it is a very important work, much needed in the region, and El Feki makes a lot of valid points. But perhaps it is better describe the book a coming of age-document, a sentimental journey of the author going back to her roots in Egypt, blended with interviews on the intimate lives of Egyptians.

John Pappas says

A good survey of how Egyptians, Tunisians and Moroccans view sex and sexuality (marriage, singletons, prostitution, sex ed and LGTB rights). Most material centered around Egypt and how the recent uprising affected views on sexuality with interviews serving as the primary source. Overall very enjoyable with the basic thesis bring that until equal rights (mundane and sexual) can be achieved for Egyptian and Arabian women, LGTB rights remain underground.
