

The power of sex in the Arab world

Shereen El Feki sheds light on the rules of engagement and hypocrisy, and hopes for a new era of sexual equality

Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World, by Shereen El Feki
(Doubleday Canada 368 pages, \$32.95)

Saturday, March 30, 2013
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The news photos – one real, one Photoshopped – went around the world two weeks ago. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was shown at the state funeral of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez giving someone a warm hug. They're holding hands, eyes closed, faces touching. In the original, the other person is Chavez's grieving mother; in the faked version, it's Egypt's opposition leader, a man.



Why the subterfuge? Ultraconservative Muslims judged the first picture to be "haram," against their rules of proper social behaviour between the sexes, and doctored it before posting it on their websites. To them, a man embracing a woman in public is a no-no, even in mourning. But when two men do it - at least, two heterosexual ones - that's "halal," allowable because it doesn't invite ridicule.

Never mind that the censorship itself might invite ridicule, it's instructive: In much of the Muslim world, a double standard for men and women is considered essential for the proper functioning of society. And as we learn in Shereen El Feki's book, *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, though attitudes are changing, that double standard extends even into the bedroom.

Born in England and raised an only child in Waterloo, Ontario, El Feki comes at her subject as a bit of an outsider, describing herself as a "liberal Muslim woman" with "the fair features of my Welsh mother and a figure that's more arrow than Arabesque," someone who never spoke Arabic well despite regular trips back to her father's family in Egypt, and whose writerly interest in sex is, well, rather unusual.

A former journalist for The Economist and Al Jazeera English, and once vice-chair of the United Nations Global Commission on HIV and the Law, she spent five years researching her book, mostly in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country. With erudition, humour and an activist's eye, she looks at the region's rules of sexual engagement, the people who set those rules, and others who bend or break them.

"Islam, in its essence, acknowledges the power of sex – particularly women's desire – so much so that it established rules and regulations to channel its force, albeit with male satisfaction foremost in mind," El Feki writes. One blatant example: In Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, couples can enter into "pleasure marriages" in order to have sex, while Egypt allows unofficial "customary unions" and "deal marriages."

Another little-known fact: Though generally taboo, anal sex is practised in countries like Tunisia to keep an unmarried woman "intact," her hymen unbroken, thereby ensuring she's still eligible when the time comes to wed.

And since the appearance of virginity is everything, for those who can't wait to get in the sack, hymen reattachment surgery is also common.

More often than not, it's the man who benefits from the deception. From porn to polygamy, he pulls the strings.

"There's a word for this, doing one thing in private and another in public: hypocrisy," El Feki writes, laying out the contradictions. "Men free to have sex before marriage, but women expected to be intact; virginity defined by anatomy, not chastity; sex tourism masquerading as marriage; travellers who make a great show of their piety at home, but who waste no time in breaking every rule once abroad."

Denouncing the duplicity, the author recalls a golden age of Arab culture – the period of the Abbasid Empire lasting from the eighth to the 10th centuries – when sex was celebrated in "literature, poetry, medical treatises, self-help manuals," a time when, far from being religious prudes, Muslim "men of learning (had) as full a knowledge of sexual practices as they did of the intricacies of Islam."

She looks forward to a new era, a renaissance born with the Arab Spring of 2010-11, in which sexual equality will be added to the long list of freedoms growing across North Africa, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Just as religious conservatism in the 20th century was a reaction to centuries of Ottoman and European colonialism, so, too, she hopes can sex be a liberation for today's Arabs.

"When it comes to sexuality," El Feki writes, "the Arab world can seem like a citadel, an impregnable fortress whose outer face repels any perceived assault on the bastion of heterosexual marriage and family. But the reality ... is that there are plenty of openings - not just innovators who are working for change ... but ordinary people trying to find happiness in the miniature of their own lives."

She cites married women curious about vibrators and other sex toys, single ones eager for sex education, subversive fashions like "curve-molding tunics, Lycra being God's gift to Arab men," Egyptian sex-help lines ("Imagine Nefertiti on toll-free"), birth-control pills and Viagra and, in Cairo, fertility clinics operating despite religious restrictions (try getting semen when masturbation is haram).

She writes of opponents to change, too: imams who "sweep sex under the prayer rug" or, worse, zealots who think "marriage is a license to fuck" (as one Moroccan sexologist crudely puts it); macho Egyptian men who whistle at women in the street ("a soft hissing sound like a tire leaking air"); foreign-movie subtitle writers in Lebanon skilled at euphemisms ("My favourite: 'that deviant practice,' for fellatio.") As a journalist, El Feki has an ear for authentic-sounding quotes. Talking about his sex life, for instance, a Cairo taxi driver insists "No, no, I am natural, no Veeagra."

Her grandmother has a saucy way with words, too; El Feki uses them as epigraphs for several chapters, like this one on homosexuality and "the importance of minding your own business": "So long as it's away from my ass, I don't mind."

Is change on the horizon? Yes, the author argues in the cheekily titled final chapter, *Come the Revolution*.

It won't be "a sexual revolution, I think, but a sexual re-evaluation, in which people will one day have the education, the inclination and the freedom to take an unblinkered view of what they were, how they came to be what they are and what they could be in the years to come.

"The confidence and creativity of Arab civilization was once reflected in its sexual life," she concludes. "For the first time in a long time, we have a chance to see this again."

No Photoshop necessary.