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# **Narratives of Lesbian Existence in Egypt – Coming to Terms with Identities**

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## Abstract

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**Summary:**

This Bachelor thesis deals with the sexual identity of Egyptian women who love and have relationships with other women. I theoretically study the state of existing literature on homosexuality in the Middle East, and I do this from a gender perspective. By looking closer at four recent books on this topic I derive two main, and contradictory, theories. The first is put forth by Joseph A Massad in his book *Desiring Arabs*, where he rejects the existence of homosexuality in the Middle East, declaring that same sex acts in this region don't constitute identities, as in the West. The second theory, best represented in Samar Habib's work *Female homosexuality in the Middle East*, sees past and present histories of same sex love as representations of homosexuality. The empirical basis for my analysis is five in-depth interviews with Egyptian women having sexual relationships with women. Examining my material I find a negation of Massad's theory and a confirmation of Habib's, the women indeed describe sexual *identities*. I look into these descriptions and see how the women have reached this point of realizing – or coming to terms. I also study their narratives of passing, as heterosexual women, in order to avoid repression. The women's knowledge of society's prejudice gives the explanation for their choices of passing, but at the same time the women's stories show a will to challenge the view on lesbian women and resist the compulsory heterosexuality.

**Keywords:** *Egypt, identity, homosexuality, lesbian, orientalism, passing.*

<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Background: A crackdown on gay men in Egypt .....	4
1.2 Representations of lesbian women.....	5
1.3 Lack of meeting places .....	6
1.4 Aim of research.....	7
1.5 Problem statement.....	8
1.6 A note on terminology .....	8
<b>2. THEORY .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Essentialism contra constructivism.....	9
2.2 Lesbian studies and queer theory .....	9
2.3 Norm or compulsory? .....	10
2.4 Constructions of identities .....	10
2.5 Passing as heterosexual.....	12
2.6 Female homosexuality as an appendix.....	12
2.7 State of existing research in the field .....	13
2.8 Current literature – opposing each other.....	15
2.9 The view on female sexuality .....	16
2.10 Homosexuality as identity or practice.....	17
2.11 An identity of otherness .....	19
2.12 Gender segregation as explanation .....	19
2.13 Some definitions and terminology .....	20
<b>3. METHOD.....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1 Pioneering research.....	22
3.2 In-depth interviews .....	22
3.3 Language.....	23
3.4 Narratives.....	24
3.5 My position as researcher .....	25
3.6 Fieldwork, building trust.....	26

<b>4. THE INFORMANTS .....</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 Presentation of the women.....	27
4.2 Selection .....	28
4.3 Representativity .....	28
4.4 Class.....	28
4.5 Religion.....	29
<b>5. EMPIRICAL STUDY AND ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>31</b>
5.1 Split between sex and love?.....	31
5.2 Coming to terms.....	32
5.3 Passing and acting straight.....	34
5.4 Mother's reactions .....	36
5.5 Facing prejudice.....	37
5.6 Negating segregation as reason.....	39
<b>6. CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>41</b>
6.1 Reviewing the empirical findings .....	41
6.2 Suggestions for further research .....	43
<b>7. REFERENCES AND SOURCES .....</b>	<b>44</b>
7.1 Books .....	44
7.2 Articles and essays.....	46
7.3 Radio.....	47
7.4 Websites.....	47
7.5 Primary interviews.....	48
7.6 Other interviews.....	48
7.7 Observations .....	48
7.8 Appendix – Information given to the interviewees.....	49

# 1. Introduction

*“...and thus I finally believed  
that she and she can definitely be”*

poem by Negma<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Background: A crackdown on gay men in Egypt

The Human Rights Watch’s surveys show that the legal rights of homosexuals are being violated in Egypt:

“Egypt is carrying out a crackdown. The professed motive is cultural authenticity coupled with moral hygiene. The means include entrapment, police harassment, and torture. The agents range from government ministers to phalanxes of police informers fanning out across Cairo. The victims are men suspected of having sex with men. The violence is aimed not only at their loves but at their lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Much has been written about The Queen Boat Trial<sup>3</sup> and there are many theories to why this crackdown occurred.<sup>4</sup> The state’s need of gaining support amongst conservative groups that otherwise would side with the Muslim Brotherhood, is one plausible and repeated explanation. Why gay men and not lesbian women are targeted is another question, that none of the literature on the Queen Boat deals with.

This kind of violence and torture has not been reported against women having sex with women in Egypt, they haven’t been subjected to the same kind of state scrutiny and persecution. There has been no similar crackdown on lesbians and the Egyptian law on “debauchery” applies to gay men only.

The amount of material that exists about male-male sex in Egypt or in the broader region of the Middle East, from different perspectives, is far more extensive than the same material on female-female sex. The lack of discussion and research on female same-sex desire in Egypt points to a vast gap in the understanding and knowledge of this group.

And research into this field shows diametrically different theories, debating the very existence of homosexuality in the Middle East. A debate that cannot be ignored since it touches central questions of orientalism and hetero-normativity.

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<sup>1</sup> Negma, one of the women I interviewed for this study, read one of her poems for me when I interviewed her 2009-03-26. This is part of it.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, *In a time of Torture*, published February 29, 2004.  
<http://www.hrw.org/en/node/12167/section/2> Found online 2009-07-12

<sup>3</sup> “May 2001 saw the best-known case in the crackdown begin: fifty-two men ultimately went to trial, many arrested during a police raid on a Cairo discotheque, the ‘Queen Boat,’ frequented by gay men.” from Human Rights Watch, *In a time of Torture*, published February 29, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> “The Cairo 52 is not an isolated case,” said Scott Long of the IGLHRC, referring to the Queen Boat trial. “It is becoming [clear] that persecution of homosexuals is a major human rights issue in Egypt.” From “More trouble in Cairo”. Advocate, 12/25/2001 Issue 853, page 18.

## 1.2 Representations of lesbian women

The first remark to make about the image that exists of lesbian women in Egypt is that it hardly exists at all. With image I mean any kind of verbal, written, artistic, journalistic, or fictional description that include female same sex desire. The women I interviewed for this study<sup>5</sup> also talked about the lack of such images or information, something they were searching for and needing while coming to terms with their sexualities. When they talk about any images, they only mention negative stories about female homosexuality, where it clearly is condemned, either in the papers or in the news.

In looking into Egyptian cinema both Garay Menicucci<sup>6</sup> and Samar Habib found a lack of such fictional images and the few images that do exist are very negative.

“...the scarcity of images representing female homosexuality speak of the general oppression of women in patriarchal societies. In these scarce representations, women and men of deviant sexualities have a tendency to share similar tragic fates or else have their deviance corrected by the end of the narrative (through heterosexual union).”<sup>7</sup>

The women I interviewed had searched for such lesbian representations outside of Egypt. The Lebanese film “Sukkar Banat”<sup>8</sup> was mentioned as one such positive example of a film with a lesbian character that is portrayed without condemnation or a negative ending. Other such examples were the TV-series L-word<sup>9</sup> that Leila<sup>10</sup> loved or a French film that Khadidja let me borrow. These are what Pia Lundahl refers to as lesbian representations, which give women the knowledge of what the term lesbian means<sup>11</sup>.

I made an observation of a negative representation of female homosexuality in Egyptian film in “Bidoun Riqaba” (Uncensored), which I saw together with the blogger Emraa Methlya<sup>12</sup>.

One of the characters in the film, Shirin, is a woman that in two scenes is portrayed as having sexual desires for women. There is also a scene where she has sex with a man (we are let to understand that by seeing them in bed, having a cigarette, after the act). In the first scene she is paying a female dancer to have sex with her. The actual sex scene is not shown but through the payment there is no doubt of what kind of activities they are about to indulge in. The second scene shows her following a woman into the toilet and forcibly trying to fondle and caress her. The other woman makes resistance and manages to get out of the situation that can be labelled attempted rape.<sup>13</sup> This is an image of a woman having desire for other women, and I will show how the women of this study reject this characterization.

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<sup>5</sup> More on how this study was conducted and the women I interviewed under the chapters Method and Informants.

<sup>6</sup> Menicucci, Garay. 1998. “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film”, from Middle East Report, No. 206, Power and Sexuality in the Middle East (Spring, 1998), pages 32-36.

<sup>7</sup> Habib, Samar. 2008. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East, Histories and Representations*, Routledge, page 119.

<sup>8</sup> English title: “Caramel”, directed by Nadine Labaki. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0825236/>

Found online: 2009-07-24

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0330251/> Found online: 2009-07-24

<sup>10</sup> Leila, Khadidja, Samira, Mariam and Negma are pseudonyms for the women I interviewed in this study. More about them under the chapter Informants.

<sup>11</sup> Lundahl, Pia. 1998. *Lesbisk identitet*, Carlsson bokförlag, page 19.

<sup>12</sup> <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> The words Emraa (woman) and Methlya (female sameness) is the closest translation of lesbian.

<sup>13</sup> Needless to say the film ends as a tragedy and a moral lesson on what happens when the youth transgress the boundaries that the older generation should be there to put up. All the characters that indulge in different sins, such as premarital sex, drugs and criminality end up flunking in school and going to jail. Here the homosexual sexual scenes are just one of many immoral acts that are portrayed negatively.

### 1.3 Lack of meeting places

In a society where lesbian women are both invisible and abhorred at the same time, all of the women I spoke with had a longing for meeting or speaking with other women in the same situation, with the same feelings. The longing has different desires bound within it. They describe the need of friends, other women to share with, and representations of lesbian love. They also wanted to find love and flirt.

But no such open meeting place exists in Cairo at present. There are no officially gay friendly clubs or bars and there aren't even any places famous for being frequented by lesbians. The Queen Boat used to be a place like this for gay men in Cairo, but that ended with the clampdown and arrest by the police in 2001.

Brian Whitaker, in his book *Unspeakable love*, mentions the lack of meeting places for women but acknowledge that there used to be one such place.

“One popular meeting place used to be a public bath where women would go for hair removal /.../ though it's now closed, apparently on health grounds.”<sup>14</sup>

Neil Millers journalistic research back in 1992 didn't give any finding of an existing lesbian community, or women having sex with women at all.<sup>15</sup>

Afdhere Jama describes a closed community in Cairo, *Hamd*, which was established back in 1963 by a woman named Farduz.<sup>16</sup> Apparently it worked for more than 40 years creating a monthly gathering for lesbian women. Whether these gatherings still take place or not was impossible for me to research into. One of the women I interviewed, Khadidja, had read about this group, but never met any of them.

But any gatherings or micro community that exists has to be underground and secret, and therefore there might be many groups like this one, meeting in private homes and only letting in women that one in the group can give guarantees for. The women that I met can be said to be members of a similar group. Nothing openly organised, but still a closed group of friends that meet regularly and let in new friends of friends. It is hard to see this as an existing subculture.

Most of the time this group meets over a cup of coffee or tea in a public place, which means that they have to use a form of coded language. They grammatically use masculine instead of feminine when they are talking about their love, if they suspect that someone is eaves dropping. Since Arabic has no neutral form the grammar always shows sex, even if you try talking without saying names. This same strategy is used as soon as some other friends, that are not part of the group, join for a cup of coffee. Conversations can continue but are put through this heterosexual prism. This way they can pass as a group of girls talking about boys. This strategy is something they are used of doing in different situations, but it was also a secret language they declare that they wished they didn't need using.

During my observations, I saw how observant they were of listeners and the fears they showed when,

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<sup>14</sup> Whitaker, Brian. 2006. *Unspeakable love, Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East*, University of California Press, Berkeley., page 51.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, Neil. 1992. *Out in the World – Gay and Lesbian Life from Buenos Aires to Bangkok*, Vintage Books, pp 67-92. His text on the other hand is a typical example of the kind of orientalist approach that Joseph A Massad attacks in his book *Desiring Arabs*. It could easily be used as a travel guide for gay sex tourists from Western countries.

<sup>16</sup> Jama, Afdhere. 2008. *Illegal Citizens – Queer Lives in the Muslim World*, Salaam Press, pp. 99.

for example, a lonely man was sitting with a wireless connection at the next coffee table. Whether the police was monitoring their meetings or taping them is of course impossible to find out. But the women’s fear of this is clear and creates boundaries that are very real for them.

So in the end the place to meet and get to know friends and lovers is online. This is what all the women in my study mention as the means for finding other women.

“Online is the only place where you can find women. Even until now, it’s online because here we don’t have these cafés or bars. So it’s online, we’re online.” (Khadidja)

“When I was 21 I got a new computer from my mother and then I started thinking that internet was the only way of getting in touch with other girls like me. Girls I could tell that I’m into them without having to be afraid. So I started looking for lesbian girls online.” (Leila)

“It’s not that difficult, you can just log on to facebook, get to know someone there and then meet up, it’s not difficult at all. I met like 80 or 90 percent of my lesbian friends online.” (Mariam)

But this is still not without risks. As soon as they want to meet up with someone in real life, the fear of being lured into a trap is there. Friendships and crushes develop in chat rooms and on emails for months and sometimes years without the women daring to meet each other face to face.

#### **1.4 Aim of research**

There is a general lack of information about female homosexuality in Egypt and very little research to draw upon. I will study the material that has been produced about homosexuality in the Middle East, and I will do this from a gender perspective. Not all of the research on “homosexuality” has actually dealt with both male and female experiences. In societies where the legal status differs between men and women and where the social status also divides women and men into two very separate groups, it is not possible to deal with “homosexuals” without clarifying gender.

Homosexuality has long been marginalized by the norm of heterosexuality. In the existing material that I analyze, the same thing happens to women in relation to men. I will show that the conclusions some theorists draw from analyzing male-male sex are not applicable to female-female sex.

I will assess whether the conclusion that homosexuality as identity doesn’t exist could be applied to the interviewees in my study.

By adding five voices of women in Egypt who are living lesbian lives, I will show how the concept of identity is valid when it comes to defining these women’s views on their own sexuality. By listening to the narratives of the women we will gain insight of how these women describe the need of acting straight in their everyday life.

With the women’s stories in mind we will see how they were taught where the line of normality is drawn and how they need to be perceived as “good women”. This knowledge of society’s prejudice is forming their identities. But they are also resisting this image by arguing against it and challenging the existing terms, which carry this prejudice.



## 1.5 Problem statement

According to theorists like Joseph A Massad<sup>17</sup> the concept of homosexuality as an identity doesn't exist in the Middle East. Samar Habib<sup>18</sup> on the other hand shows that female homosexuality, as what could be labelled an identity, has a long history in the Middle East.

In this study I will analyze my material to see how it reflects these theories.

I will try to answer these questions with my study:

**How do the women of this study describe themselves in terms of sexual identity?**

**Which would be the most fitting image to describe them – as women who engage in sexual acts with other women, or as women with lesbian identities?**

**How do the women describe their "coming to terms"?**

**What can the narratives of passing tell us?**

**How do the women describe society's view on homosexuality and what is the response to this image given by the women in this study?**

## 1.6 A note on terminology

This is how I will use the terms in this paper:

**Gay:** The word itself is gender neutral but has, in the Anglo-Saxon world, been kidnapped by homosexual men. Although it is often used as in "gay community" or "gay rights", and in these cases it's not exclusively men that are encompassed. I will not use these terms here. Even if one of the women in this study prefers the word gay to describe her sexual identity I will in this paper use "Gay Men" to refer to homosexual men.

**Lesbian:** To be clear I will use "Lesbian" together with "woman" or "women". This has two reasons: First to make the use of Gay Men and Lesbian Women clear and more equal. Secondly it is because I don't see Lesbianism as a preset and stable identity in itself but one of many adjectives that women can use to describe their sexual identities with.

**Homosexuality:** A gender neutral word to describe same sex acts, feelings and desires.

I will not use the abbreviation LGBTQ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transsexual/gender-Queer), since I focus on only one of these groups and also because I see more differences than similarities between these different groups.

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<sup>17</sup> Massad, Joseph A. 2007. *Desiring Arabs*, The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>18</sup> Habib, S. 2008.

## 2. Theory

By discussing the field of sexuality studies and looking at literature on homosexuality in the Middle East, both historically and contemporary, I will situate my thesis within a current discussion on the existence of what can be termed homosexuality.

### 2.1 Essentialism contra constructivism

Michel Foucault’s books on the history of sexuality revolutionized the view on sexuality and have been influential on the whole field of sexuality studies. What he did was to show how heterosexuality was created in Western societies during the last 300 years.<sup>19</sup> By introducing the concept of discourses he shows that heterosexuality as hegemonic discourse is a social construction specific in both time and place.

According to the constructionist perspective sexuality all together is constructed in relation to others, and the interaction in society and with family and friends is defining what normality and the abnormal are.<sup>20</sup> Feminist theories on gender have the same criticisms of essentialism, so does post colonial studies and the newer field of intersectionalism.<sup>21 22</sup>

Since the release of his books, Foucault has been subject to criticism from a number of different perspectives. One of them is feminist and another is post colonial<sup>23</sup> and they both show that his categories and classifications are not as universal as he claims and that they rest on patriarchal and orientalist assumptions.

“Foucault’s deployment of an East/West divide is motivated in part by his concern to establish a premodern/modern periodization.”<sup>24</sup>

### 2.2 Lesbian studies and queer theory

The field of Lesbian and Gay Studies grew and was formulated during the same period as Women’s studies. Both these fields of research were new and grew out of a perception of marginalized groups, whose history, social status and liberation struggles needed to be researched.<sup>25</sup> They were collective groups that were seen to be oppressed in society, by structures.

When the post-structuralist debate entered the scene these collective groups were scrutinized and it became obvious by the criticism directed at them that they couldn’t represent or describe the whole

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, M., Gröndahl, B. & Johansson, P.M. 1976/2004, *Sexualitetens historia*, Daidalos, Göteborg.

<sup>20</sup> Lewin, Bo. 2002. ”Sexualiteten som social konstruktion” from Lundberg, Per Olov (red): *Sexologi*. Stockholm, Liber.

<sup>21</sup> For an analysis and discussion on this newer field see Paulina de los Reyes and Satus Gröndahls anthology *Framtidens feminismer – intersektionella interventioner i den feministiska debatten*.

<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that essentialist perspectives are dead. Samar Habib, who I will examine later in this study, is trying to revoke essentialist theory.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most outstanding in the critique of Foucault is Ann Laura Stoler who with her book *Race and the Education of Desire – Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* showed how Foucault’s theory built on empirical studies devoid of racial or colonial insights. The critique on Foucault’s empirical part was not new, but the theory had not been daunted by this critique and Stoler was asking why.

<sup>24</sup> Traub, Valerie, 2008. “The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies”, from *Islamicate Sexualities – Translations across temporal Geographies of Desire*, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, page 17.

<sup>25</sup> Rosenberg, Tiina. 2002. *Queerfeministisk agenda*, Stockholm, Atlas, page 14.

spectra of lesbians or women, but that the academia in fact were focused on middle class, white women in the Western world. And it was argued that individuals were not just passive victims of oppressive structures, but were actively communicating the world. This world was not something totally outside of the individual, but all knowledge was created in an ongoing communication.<sup>26</sup>

Gender studies and queer studies developed as a result of these discussions and critiques. They can therefore be seen as advancements of earlier theories, but instead of this linear view on knowledge I will rather see these research fields as linked, and posing and thus answering different questions.

### 2.3 Norm or compulsory?

One of the earliest essays to portray heterosexuality as an institution was Adrienne Richs groundbreaking “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”.<sup>27</sup> Together with a queer criticism of hetero normativity Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” are usable tools to understand how heterosexuality is made to be perceived as “natural” and how this “natural” order of things works through social compulsion, force. Stressing that it is norm, heterosexuality has a need of the dichotomy of homosexuality to put all negative connotations here.<sup>28</sup> The Others, the abnormal are used to define the norm so that it is perceived as natural. Rich rather talks about forcing practices and shows that if being heterosexual was natural then societies wouldn’t have to punish and hunt down rebels that have escaped the confinement of heterosexuality.

Exploring the heterosexual norm and showing that lesbian women are norm breakers would be scientifically true for Egypt as well as Sweden, but it is a blunt description, it doesn’t mean the same thing in every context. Norms are linked to the textual interpretations, while the compulsion is linked to practices and the forbidden. The norm of heterosexuality is very broad, and can be applied to any existing context. But to analyze how the norm manifests itself we need to look at the examples of compulsion, of forces that make women conform. This differs due to the cultural context and can be things such as acting, dressing, getting married or mothering.

### 2.4 Constructions of identities

Identity in this paper is dealt with as something constructed in the interaction with other people and with society at large. It is important to see that identity is not something a person “carries around”, and it’s not something that “essentially constitutes a being”.<sup>29</sup>

Post-colonial theories have dealt a great deal with identities and the resistance against the colonial

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<sup>26</sup> Lenz Taguchi, Hillevi. 2006. *In på bara benet. En introduktion till feministisk poststrukturalism*. Stockholm, HLS Förlag, page 62.

<sup>27</sup> Rich, Adrienne. 1980. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, from *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), pp. 631-660. Published by: The University of Chicago Press.

I have chosen the title of this paper as a tribute to this essay. Adrienne Rich describes that her term Lesbian Existence is to show the historical presence of lesbians and to reject the clinical and limiting term lesbianism. “Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life.”

<sup>28</sup> Rosenberg, T. 2002, page 17.

<sup>29</sup> Alsmark, Gunnar (ed.). 1997/2001. *Skjorta eller själ? Kulturella identiteter i tid och rum*, Lund, Studentlitteratur, page 11.

typology. This view could be transferred on to my material to show how the women I interviewed form their identities at the same time within and without the norm, and with reference to more than one cultural context. They do not have just one identity, but rather a plurality of fluid identities.

“Rather than aspire to the ideal of *self-identity*, in which one’s conception of oneself matches exactly one’s social behaviour, postcolonial writers exploit the disjunction between conception and behaviour, deriving at ‘identity(ies)’ in the process.”<sup>30</sup>

This discrepancy between social performance of heterosexuality and the private sexual identity of non-conformity, is creating a plurality of identities. This plurality creates ambivalence and non-stability.

Part of this non-stability is identity’s temporal and geographical changeability. This can be understood as a process of self-reflexivity, where the self is created over and over again as a narrative, or self-biography. The choice of which part of the story to tell different persons and in different situations is what constitutes identities.<sup>31</sup>

Seeing identity as a construct rather than essence calls for knowledge of the context in which this changing and multi-dimensioned identity is formed.<sup>32</sup>

Pia Lundahl “emphasizes the relational in identity forming, between society and the individual, between different groups and the individual, between other individuals and the individual. Foremost it’s about the interaction between the objectifications of individuals and groups by society, and the subjectifications that individuals themselves manage to create.”<sup>33</sup> (My translation.)

Identity is something fluid in the interaction between the norm in society and the personal experience of non-conforming desire. With this Lundahl means that lesbian identity depends on lesbian representation, that only when you have the knowledge of lesbian existence you can perceive yourself as having a lesbian sexuality.<sup>34</sup> This constructionist perspective makes identity forming different depending on where the individual is living and interacting.

If we see sexual identities as constructions that have to be created over and over, or performed<sup>35</sup>, then the narrativity in this study is one example of such creating of sexual identities.

Pia Laskar in her study on heterosexuality<sup>36</sup> shows how it has to be repeatedly constructed so that in the end it will be perceived as “natural”. What she describes are normalization processes, which, through bipolar oppositions of heterosexuality/homosexuality, creates the norm.

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<sup>30</sup> Castle, Gregory (ed.). 2001. *Postcolonial discourses: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, page 506. Emphasis not mine.

<sup>31</sup> Alsmark, G (ed.). 1997/2001, page 65.

<sup>32</sup> Petersson, Bo & Robertson, Alexa (ed). 2003. *Identitetsstudier i praktiken*, Malmö, Liber, page 36.

<sup>33</sup> Lundahl, P. 1998, page 19. “betonar det relationella i identitetsformeringen, mellan samhället och individen, mellan olika grupper och individen, mellan andra individer och individen. Framför allt handlar det om samspelet mellan de objektiveringar som samhället gör av individer och grupper och de subjektivering som individen själv förmår skapa”

<sup>34</sup> Lundahl, P. 1998, page 19.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, Judith. 2005. *Könet brinner!*, Natur och Kultur, page 230.

<sup>36</sup> Laskar, Pia. 2005. *Ett bidrag till heterosexualitetens historia – Kön, sexualitet & njutningsnormer i sexhandböcker 1800-1920*, Stockholm Modernista, page 20.

## 2.5 Passing as heterosexual

Acting straight or passing as a heterosexual woman is a strategy to avoid repression or other negative consequences, a position that can be labelled as “keeping up appearances”.

“A public or readable queer identity can be said, therefore, to consist of the active or willful [sic] negation of passing. But because an accurate reading of the queer body can, in many social and political contexts, result in obviously terrible consequences (even unto death), passing becomes a form of passive resistance, one that protects the gay from hostile interpretations.”<sup>37</sup>

It’s a matter of parallelism, of multiple narratives. One you tell the outer audience, society at large, and another one that you keep to yourself. I focus on this view on passing, as a “method of protection or self-defence”.<sup>38</sup> The notion that passing at the same time can be experienced as “pleasurable, even desirable” or an experience that “trades on the erotics of secrecy and revelation”<sup>39</sup> is marginal in my study.

This is because I see passing as using invisibility for protection, not as a pleasurable choice. In a hostile environment deriving pleasure from secrecy can not be distinguished from deriving pleasure altogether, since there is no real choice of visibility. In theories on passing visibility is being “marked out” as different. A subject that passes as the norm is being invisible. At the same time “heterosexual culture continually passes itself off as being merely natural, the undisputed and unmarked norm...”<sup>40</sup>

## 2.6 Female homosexuality as an appendix

Some literature deals with male homosexuality exclusively in the Middle East<sup>41</sup>, just as there is current and historic research on “homosexualities” in general in the Middle East. Although when books and research are presented as dealing with both male and female homosexuality, they often describe male homosexuality as the norm. In such texts, female homosexuality is added almost as an afterthought, often dealt with as an appendix, giving the issue one chapter or just a couple of pages all together. This male bias is not limited to the material on the Middle East, and has been paid attention to before, regarding the whole field.

“Historically, lesbianism has not always been addressed equally within gay studies. It has been assumed that lesbianism is more difficult to identify historically, more hidden and silenced, less accessible to the scholar.”<sup>42</sup>

It is true that it is less accessible – when it comes to finding existing research on the subject. That is one

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<sup>37</sup> Sánchez, María Carla and Schlossberg, Linda (ed.). 2001. *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, New York University Press, page 3.

<sup>38</sup> Sánchez, M C and Schlossberg, L (ed.). 2001, page 3

<sup>39</sup> Sánchez, M C and Schlossberg, L (ed.). 2001, page 3

<sup>40</sup> Sánchez, M C and Schlossberg, L (ed.). 2001, page 5.

<sup>41</sup> My research is focused on Egypt, but in order to find related research I broadened the perspective as much as possible, looking for anything that had to do with sexualities and the Middle East, the Arab world or Islam. There is some literature that I have to leave since the comparability with Egypt is too far fetched. That’s examples from Indonesian society or Iranian. Although two Islamic countries they have very little in common with Egypt. Afsaneh Najmabadi for example has done a thorough job on exploring female sexuality and desires in the book *Women with Mustaches and men without Beards – gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. When it comes to her analyzes of pre-modern Iranian Shia Islam the views may have similarities with pre-modern Egyptian Sunni Islam, but the current post-1979 discussion on Iran is very specific and can not be compared with the situation in Egypt today.

<sup>42</sup> Zimmerman, Bonnie (ed.). 1999. *Encyclopedia of Lesbian Histories and Cultures*, Garland Publishing, Incorporated, from Introduction, page XII.

problem that I have encountered – but it is also a motivation for me to conduct this study.

“Studies on female homosexuality in this region are relatively unknown, which resonates with the neglected history of female sexuality in general. In the course of my research, I have discovered material from the Middle Ages to the present that has not been discussed in a modern context.”<sup>43</sup>

Samar Habib’s study shows that there are sources to pour from but that this has not been done to the same extent as when it comes to research on male homosexuality.

There is an integral problem with much of the existing material. The authors don’t state clearly what kind of homosexuality they write about. But even if it’s not always clear in the texts that the discussions are exclusively about male homosexuality, we need to perceive it as such. Female homosexuality is for example NOT illegal in Egypt, as male ditto is under the law on debauchery. This means that it is wrong to say that homosexuality is illegal in Egypt – when authors give such statement they are referring to *one* form of homosexuality, the male.

“The subject of female homosexuality in the Arab intellectual tradition has always been one of absence or dismissal. This can be attributed to the fact that female sexuality is mostly seen as primarily heterosexual in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Consequently, erotic relations among women are devalued as a temporary substitute for the love of men, and are considered of no real threat to the dominant heterosexual system as long as they remain undercover, or in the closet.”<sup>44</sup>

I will show in my chapter on empirical findings and analysis how Iman Al-Ghafari’s view above, on female homosexuality, fits with the stories of my informants.

## 2.7 State of existing research in the field

Stephen O. Murray’s 500-page book *Homosexualities*<sup>45</sup>, despite having worldwide and historical claim, still has no chapter on female homosexuality in the Middle East at any historical time. There is a chapter on “The Mamluks of Medieval Egypt”, one on “Pages and Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire”, one dealing with “Accommodations to Pederasty across the Abode of Islam”, “Boy-Wives in the Sudan”, “Effeminized Boy Entertainers/Prostitutes in Some Islamic Societies”, “The Sohari Khanit” and “Muslim Non-Role-Demarcated Male Homosexual Relations” which shows that there are many representations of Muslim men, of Egyptian history and other examples from the Middle East and the Islamic world – but no representation of female homosexuality.

Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe’s book *Islamic Homosexualities – Culture, History and Literature*<sup>46</sup> (330 pages) has one chapter on “Woman-woman Love in Islamic Societies”<sup>47</sup>, with five pages of text on this issue, ending with the explanation of the meagre material and also by putting the blame on women.

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<sup>43</sup> Habib, S. 2008, page 3.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Ghafari, Iman. 2003. “Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?”, from *Al-Raida*, vol XX, no 99, pages 86-90. <http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/email/AlRaida/2002.03/No99Fall.pdf> Found online 2009-07-10.

<sup>45</sup> Murray, Stephen O. 2000. *Homosexualities*, The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, Stephen O & Roscoe, Will (ed.), 1997. *Islamic Homosexualities – Culture, History and Literature*, New York University Press.

<sup>47</sup> Murray, Stephen O. 1997. “Woman-woman Love in Islamic Societies”, from *Islamic Homosexualities – Culture, History and Literature*, edited by Murray, Stephen O & Roscoe, Will, New York University Press, page 97-104.

“...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.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite this the editors still decided to name the book *Islamic Homosexualities* – and not the more accurate title *Male Islamic Homosexualities*.

The book also has a chapter by Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch, “Institutionalized gender-Crossing in Southern Iraq”<sup>49</sup>, where the author explores the occurrence of “*mustergil*” [sic]<sup>50</sup>, that is, “a woman in men’s clothing”.<sup>51</sup> The chapter raises questions on how the editors of the book view female homosexuality, since Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch clearly notes that: “...the *mustergil* [sic] cannot be attributed to sexual motivations but rather is a function of the overall social order.”<sup>52</sup> Female cross-dressing is here explained to be for economic reasons, status and because of women’s unwillingness to subordinate themselves under men – not sexual desires.

The anthology *Gay*, edited by Robert Aldrich<sup>53</sup> claims to give us the world history of homosexuality, with different chapters on different parts of the world. The chapter on “The Middle East and North Africa” is written by Vincenzo Patanè and stretches over more than 30 pages, dealing with religion, medieval history, active/passive discussions, western sex tourism and more. But female homosexuality isn’t even given a full sentence. It is instead dealt with within parenthesis saying that lesbian relations are believed to be common, but that this is “something we don’t know that much about”.<sup>54</sup> His reference is the few pages in Murray & Roscoe’s book mentioned above. Apart from this there is one sentence speculating on Umm Kulthum being bisexual<sup>55</sup>.

The exact same reference to Murray’s small chapter is what Didi Khayatt uses in Bonnie Zimmerman’s *Encyclopedia of Lesbian Histories and Cultures*<sup>56</sup>. In a paragraph under “Egypt” she describes shortly pharaonic history, Islamic law, class differences and the problematic of finding a term in Arabic.

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<sup>48</sup> Murray, S O & Roscoe, W (ed.), 1997, page 102

<sup>49</sup> This essay was originally published in German back in 1956, and for some reason the editors – more than 40 years later – see it as the best thing they can find about female homosexuality.

<sup>50</sup> She calls the woman that dress as a man *mustergil* throughout the text. There are two apparent mistakes here. First: The letter g does not exist in standard Arabic, instead it must be the letter *djim*, and therefore rather a dj-pronunciation. In Egyptian dialect the djim is pronounced as a g, but not in Iraqi dialect. The djim is correct when we see to the meaning of the word. The root ra-djim-lam makes up the word man. Secondly: Using the masculine noun and not the feminine with *ta marbuta* at the ending is incorrect since the text deals with women dressing up and acting as men – not women that have undergone a sex change and become men. So, the term *mustergil* should be *musterdjila*.

<sup>51</sup> Murray, S O & Roscoe, W (ed.), 1997, page 233.

<sup>52</sup> Murray, S O & Roscoe, W (ed.), 1997, page 234.

<sup>53</sup> Aldrich, Robert (ed). 2007. *Gay – en världshistoria*, Natur och Kultur.

<sup>54</sup> Patanè, Vincenzo, 2007. “The Middle East and North Africa” from Aldrich, Robert (ed). 2007. *Gay – en världshistoria*., Natur och Kultur. ”(lesbiska relationer – mushaqa eller sihaq – tros också vara vanliga, men detta känner man inte till så mycket om)”, page 280. My translation.

<sup>55</sup> In the Swedish translation that I read, Umm Kulthum is described in masculine adjectives, as if the author believes that Umm Kulthum was a male singer. I have not been able to find the original version of the text, but my speculation is that it is an error in the translation. It is not stated if the article has been translated directly from Italian to Swedish or if the translation has passed through English. The words “the famous singer” can be gender neutral in English, but the words in Swedish are gender exposing.

<sup>56</sup> Zimmerman, B (ed). 1999, page 257-258.

## 2.8 Current literature – opposing each other

Lately four different books have been published that all claim, at least partly, to analyse female homosexuality in the Middle East. In 2006 Brian Whitaker’s book *Unspeakable love*<sup>57</sup> was published. A year later *Desiring Arabs*<sup>58</sup> by Joseph A Massad was released and in 2008 Samar Habib’s book *Female homosexuality in the Middle East*<sup>59</sup> and the anthology *Islamicate Sexualities*<sup>60</sup> were published.

As a journalist who has interviewed a lot of people and also done his own observations in the Middle East, Whitaker presents a rather complete, albeit at points subjective, portrayal of the issue with his book *Unspeakable love*.<sup>61</sup> Whitaker has clear views that homosexuality is an identity and that homosexuals in the Middle East are subject to repression and violation of their human rights. He has a will to expose the homosexuals in the Middle East with the aim of working for human rights.

Whitaker discusses at length social norms and pressures on men to conform and live up to the ideal of Middle Eastern perceptions of masculinity. These rigid norms are a hinder for men who can’t conform and are the primary societal oppressors besides laws. He does not discuss the same norms and perceptions on femininity and the oppressive measures that are used to make women conform. Neither does he acknowledge the greater possibilities for men to be in control of their own lives, at least in comparison to the meagre control most women can obtain. These are conditions that make female same-sex love and male same-sex love two very different things in the Middle East.

The only one who has done any exclusive research in female homosexuality is Samar Habib, with her thesis *Female homosexuality in the Middle East*<sup>62</sup> and her findings differ radically from Joseph A Massad’s. I will show how their different approaches and theories function in relation to my material. Brian Whitaker and the scholars represented in the anthology *Islamicate Sexualities* shows the same perceptions of sexual identities as Samar Habib, who has dealt with it more extensively. That is the reason why I will use her as a representative for those who find proof of homosexual existence in the Middle East (although still changing, due to temporal and geographical location).

Massad, Habib and the authors of the essays in *Islamicate Sexualities*, are all people of the academic world and they deal partly with the same texts<sup>63</sup> which they analyze in different ways. I have chosen to put Massad and Habib against each other due to their application and use of theory and methods. After this comparison, with my own material, I choose sides, by revealing how my material is supporting Habib’s theory and going against Massad’s assumptions.

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<sup>57</sup> Whitaker, B. 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Massad, J A. 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Habib, S. 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Babayan, Kathryn (ed) and Najmabadi, Afsaneh (ed), 2008. *Islamicate Sexualities – Translations across temporal Geographies of Desire*, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs.

<sup>61</sup> However his book includes no stated methods or description of theory. He uses his interview material and his own points of view as his political arguments.

<sup>62</sup> Habib, S. 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Massad and Habib analyses for example Al-Tifashis book “Nuzhat...” reaching very different conclusions.



## 2.9 The view on female sexuality

“Women are assigned the role of bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions, and the symbol of the community...”<sup>64</sup>

Because of these roles that rest on women’s shoulders it becomes everybody’s business to make sure that individual women fulfil their “duty” in society. Families in particular are concerned that their daughters will – at least on the outside – conform.

Women’s sexuality in general should be hidden and only revealed for their husbands. Even though that is not a fact for all women, they still need to pretend that they were ignorant of sex before marriage. Men don’t have that same cultural pressure, and they don’t have any virginity (imagined hymen) to preserve. This means that heterosexual women have to hide their sexuality and lie about it. In this sense society’s view of female sexuality gives the context for understanding how lesbians are being seen.

“All societies that I know of have denied, controlled, or muted the public expression of active female sexuality. We must first decode female sexual desire, and then within it, find same-sex desire.”<sup>65</sup>

Male homosexuality is often described with no regard to heterosexual norms. Cutting female homosexuality loose from hetero normativity is harder to do, since it is breaking two norms at the same time, both the norm of heterosexuality, but also the patriarchal norms of female sexuality in general.

Although much has changed in the different societies of the Middle East, ideologically Islamists lately have been able to strengthen their rigid view on female sexuality.<sup>66</sup>

“In the Middle East, policies and practices that aim to control sexual autonomy and confine sexuality within the framework of marriage, lead to human rights violations of women, young people and those with non-conforming sexualities.”<sup>67</sup>

This means that women in general are losing control over their sexual autonomy, no matter if they have heterosexual or homosexual desires. And secondly it means that if they have non-conforming sexualities their human rights are violated again. It is important to see that we are not talking about different groups, but that lesbian women are in fact women.

“This raises a specific difference between the experiences of lesbians and homosexual men. A lesbian, closeted on her job because of heterosexist prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationships or private life; her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual but a heterosexual *woman*, in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of ‘real’ women”<sup>68</sup>

This role can be seen as a double passing, both as heterosexual and as woman.

There are women’s organizations in Egypt and some even deal with the sensitive question of sexuality.

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<sup>64</sup> al-ali, Nadjé. 2000. *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, Cambridge, page 45.

<sup>65</sup> Vicinus, Martha. 1992. “They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity”, from *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, The Lesbian Issue (Autumn, 1992), pages 469.

<sup>66</sup> Dunne, Bruce. 1998. “Power and Sexuality in the Middle East”, from *Middle East Report*, No. 206, Power and Sexuality in the Middle East (Spring, 1998), pages 8-11.

<sup>67</sup> Ikkaracan, Pinar. 2008. “Sexuality as a contested Political Domain in the Middle East”, from *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East*.

<sup>68</sup> Rich, A. 1980, page 642.

Mozn Hassan works with the feminist youth organization Nazra.

“Here in Egypt virginity is the only thing people are judging. It’s shocking, but it’s about if you’re virgin or not. This means that we in Egypt of course are against pre marital sex, but still it is happening. Is it better to have more liars in Egypt, or is it easier to accept that we can have pre-martial sexual relationships here in Egypt? No one is putting judgement on men but everyone is judging woman, if she is a virgin or not. We have operations here and it’s so humiliating.”<sup>69</sup>

This means that women have to pass as decent, at least being perceived by society as such, and presumed of being a virgin. This adjustment to the outward perception of female sexuality applies to all women. When it comes to women who desire women they have to adjust their appearance on two levels. First they have to pass as heterosexual women, to avoid encountering problems. But this is not that easy since they, at the same time, have to behave as if they are ignorant of sexuality altogether, heterosexual as well as homosexual. Herein lays the core of the dilemma, which the women expressed in the interviews. The women in this study tell stories of parents being happy that their daughter is spending time with female friends and not men, but at the same time they worry about the fact that she is not showing desire for marriage and a will to get a husband.

## 2.10 Homosexuality as identity or practice

I have distilled three distinct features, from Brian Whitaker’s book, of the topic of homosexuality in the Middle East and how it is perceived in society:<sup>70</sup>

- 1) sexuality is not clearly defined
- 2) same-sex sex is regarded as conscious, sinful acts
- 3) same-sex desire is seen as a symptom of illness or Westernization

This description shows that first of all there are no clear definitions, terms and limits to map the sexuality discussion. Sexual identity is a thing not talked about, and there is a lack of Arabic terms. The sexual act itself is regarded as an act of sin, and could be compared with adultery.

The desire is either something that a psychiatrist can “get rid of” or something that comes from exposure to Western “ideologies” and perversions, a foreign influence.

The word homosexual is often blamed for being Western by definition, as for example Joseph A Massad does in his book *Desiring Arabs*. He claims that the term in itself is Western in that it refers to a special identity. Even though people in the Middle East engage in same-sex sexual activities, this can not be synonymous with having a homosexual identity according to Massad.

“The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating.”<sup>71</sup>

Massad uses Edward Said’s notions of Orientalism to show how Western perceptions of sexuality and

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<sup>69</sup> Interview conducted with Mozn Hassan in Cairo on February 13 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Whitaker, B. 2006, pages 10-11.

<sup>71</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 41.

the Middle East have set the framework for a discussion that is, in his point of view, not correct. So he sees the Gay International<sup>72</sup> as part of a “Western encroachment on Arab and Muslim cultures”<sup>73</sup>. He also calls it crusading<sup>74</sup> and by this definition compares it with a violent Christian missionary history.

Massad’s strongest theoretical part is when he shows how the West sets the limits for the East, how the West needs the East as its Other, in a dichotomy. In a time when the West was puritanical Victorian the East was described as decadent and as deviant.<sup>75</sup> Something the Western man could fantasize about. Now the tables have turned and instead the West wants to see itself as liberal and open minded and confines the role of the opposite, the rigid oppressor of sexuality, to the East.

“While the premodern West attacked the world of Islam’s alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged *repression* of sexual freedoms.”<sup>76</sup>

Massad also has a strong point when he shows the same kind of orientalism that Edward Said exposed in the 70’s, in today’s gay guides over the Middle East<sup>77</sup>.

Massad is not alone in his critique of a current orientalism focused on sexuality. The newly mapped out field of Islamicate Sexuality Studies<sup>78</sup> have a number of researchers that develop theories on post colonial sexualities. Sahar Amer describes it like this:

“The crux of the problem lies in the West’s (both the United States and France) contemporary discursive self-presentation as secular, sexually liberated, and firmly positioned in the first world. This perspective is opposed to the contemporary assumption on Muslim and Arab women as an always already constituted coherent, stable category of sexually oppressed, socio-politically subordinate objects, victims of an all-powerful patriarchal, legal, and religious system regardless of class or of marginal and resistant modes of experiences.”<sup>79</sup>

I agree with this perspective of the problem at stake. The need of the West to assert its own position, by making the East the Other, is clear in both Massad’s and Amer’s texts, but Amer shows the importance to critique this binary categorization, while Massad on the other hand tends to emphasize and enforce the dichotomy by using bipolarity arguments himself. By marking the men that were arrested at the Queen

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<sup>72</sup> This is Massad’s term that he uses to define the international organisations ILGA, International Lesbian and Gay Association, and IGLHRC, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and all other advocates of what he sees as “missionary” and producing a discourse of homosexuality.

<sup>73</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 175.

<sup>74</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 178.

<sup>75</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 9.

<sup>76</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 37.

<sup>77</sup> Such as Neil Millers international survey *Out in the World*. Or the program “A of Arabia” that was sent on Swedish radio during the spring 2009, about a Swedish man on an “undercover” queer mission in Syria giving reports weekly about gay sex and acting, mainly from Damascus. When it comes to the women – of course just one part of his ten weeks of reporting – the western perspective became apparent. Because then he is said to have “finally found them, the ones that no one else could find – the women!” This “unveiling” of these women is embarrassingly close to the orientalist view, as if the Middle East needed this Western man to find something hidden. The problem is that he settles with this, as if they are too exotic to understand or just some kind of unchanging stable entities. He has found them, and then he continues to explore the lives of the men.

<sup>78</sup> Traub, Valerie, 2008, page 9. Valerie Traub describes it like this: “Increasingly, the field is positioning itself within a postcolonial and race-conscious frame of reference, that attempts, in the words of one influential collection, to consider the ‘interrelations of sexuality, race, and gender in a transnational context.’”

<sup>79</sup> Amer, Sahar. 2008. “Cross-dressing and Female Same-Sex Marriage in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures” from *Islamicate Sexualities – Translations across temporal Geographies of Desire*, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, page 75.

Boat in Cairo in 2001<sup>80</sup> as "Westernized Egyptian gay-identified men"<sup>81</sup> he is giving a portrait of men that in his view no longer are culturally Egyptian. This means that Massad quickly can disregard their situation, the repression against them or any claims that they themselves make, as instructed by their "Westernization". And Massad's view on civilisations seems to underscore the orientalist view – not expose its colonial power. If having certain sexual identities is Western, then the Orient will always continue to be everything opposite of the position that the West has mapped out for itself.

## 2.11 An identity of otherness

In response to Massad's accusations against the Gay International I want to use Habib's words to explain how I see this study:

"...one cannot rob these individuals of the most basic conscious knowledge of themselves as different from the dictates of standard social sexual currency."<sup>82</sup>

This knowledge of otherness or difference creates and forms identity. It's a difference that the surrounding society condemns but which the women can both curse and embrace.

"Sometimes I want to be like everyone. 'Why am I like that? It would be nice if I would be like everyone.' Not like everyone, but live like all the women in my family for example. It's a lot of pressure emotionally when you are homosexual in our society. I say that it's not cool, but at the same time sometimes I feel that I'm lucky, because I got to be someone very different. /.../ sometimes I feel that it's a blessing from *Allah*. It wasn't bad, it's positive that some... It's a gift to live all this!" (Khadidja)

Here Khadidja is floating between the two positions within the same quote. She explains how she has a will of conforming, being like the women of her family, to escape the "pressure". But then she shifts and calls herself "lucky" to experiencing being different.

## 2.12 Gender segregation as explanation

There are some theories that women turn to women because of the gender segregation. This belief comes in part from a view that if sexuality of one kind is repressed, sexuality will find other ways to express itself. The thesis here is that heterosexuality is repressed and that young people have no opportunities to explore heterosexuality before marriage. As a "second best" option they turn to same-sex activities.

Mervat Hatem has a feminist approach to historical patriarchal segregation in Egypt when she claims that "Both lesbian and homosexual relations, in fact, were sexual responses to the social segregation of the sexes."<sup>83</sup>

Stephen O Murray and Will Roscoe have both focused on mamluks, Ottoman slave elites and eunuchs

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<sup>80</sup> Human Rights Watch's report on the arrests and the tribunals against the 52 men that were convicted of "debauchery" is the most thorough study that has been done into this. During the trials media was reporting extensively on it, but with very perogatory ways of exposing the men.

<sup>81</sup> Massad, J. A. 2007, page 181.

<sup>82</sup> Habib, S. 2008, page 25. Although she refers to the medieval histories of women engaging in same sex relations and eroticism I don't see why this couldn't be applied to current histories of same-sex relations and eroticism.

<sup>83</sup> Hatem, Mervat, 1986. "The Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Segregated Patriarchal Systems: The Case of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Egypt", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), page 259.

in their discussions on male same sex practice – all extremely segregated segments of past societies.<sup>84</sup>

Bruce Dunne talks about segregation and shows how those who are denied access to licit sexuality needs other sexual outlets and that “contradictions between normative morality and social realities supported both male and female prostitution and same-sex practices in Middle Eastern societies from the medieval to the modern period.”<sup>85</sup>

Joseph A Massad exposes the same thoughts on segregation when he examines Islamic books on sex, where he shows that “the Islamic solution and ‘cure’ to all these problems and diseases, like the Christian solution offered in the West is (heterosexual) marriage.”<sup>86</sup>

Having sex with someone of the same sex is seen as just letting off steam and these sexual acts don’t constitute anything close to an identity. In literature on male-male sexual practice there are loads of theories on active/passive divisions, where only one of the men engaging in the act are perceived as having a deviant sexuality.

There is something fundamental lacking in this picture, namely a gender perspective. It’s true that men have limited availability of women, due to the view on premarital sex, which means that the women they start dating will most probably say no to sex. But women actually have the possibility of finding men for sex easily. What’s stopping women is the need of being virgins when marrying – not the men saying no.

The Egyptian society is changing and it would be wrong or out of date, to claim that women and men have no possibilities of meeting or that the sexes aren’t mixed. When looking at the middle class in Cairo it’s evident that women are studying together with men at university, working at the same work places and being out on the streets. The boom of the *hegab*<sup>87</sup> has been credited the fact that the sexes no longer are as segregated as they used to be.

Mozn Hassan, of the NGO Nazara is stressing the fact that in her view the Egyptian society is hypocritical, that there are many people having pre marital sexual relations but it’s still something that no one speaks about.<sup>88</sup>

### 2.13 Some definitions and terminology

To be able to compare and analyze whether there are any differences in the Western identity “Lesbian” and the women that I have interviewed we need to see what lesbianism means. According to Encyclopedia Britannica “lesbianism” means: “The quality or state of intense emotional and usually erotic attraction of a woman to another woman.”<sup>89</sup> The term “homosexuality” is explained as: “sexual interest in and attraction to members of one’s own sex. The term gay is frequently used as a synonym for homosexual; female homosexuality is often referred to as lesbianism.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Murray, S O & Roscoe, W (ed.), 1997.

<sup>85</sup> Dunne, B. 1998, page 9.

<sup>86</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 206.

<sup>87</sup> *hegab* = *hidjab* in egyptian dialect = veil covering at least the hair.

<sup>88</sup> Interview conducted with Mozn Hassan in Cairo on February 13 2009.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/762892/lesbianism> Found online 2009-07-13

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270637/homosexuality> Found online 2009-07-13

It can also be added that somehow the term homosexuality has become synonymous with gay men. Women are all too often added as in “homosexuals and lesbians” as if lesbians per se weren’t homosexual. Most Arabic words are demeaning and bear a negative connotation, such as:

**shadh/shadhah**<sup>91</sup>. Deviant, abnormal.

**suhaqiyya**. Usually the word to describe a woman who has sex with women, often translated tribade. The origin of this word is disputed. Massad states that the word is borrowed and that there is no Arabic root<sup>92</sup> for this word although Habib and many others claim that the root is sin – Ha – qaf, and by deriving it like this show a meaning of “rubbing” or “grinding”.<sup>93</sup>

The terms **mithli** and **mithliyya** have been introduced lately, to mean homosexual (male and female). They derives from the term: **mithliyya al djinsiyya**. A “translation” of the term homosexuality, meaning sameness in sex.<sup>94</sup>

Although the terms are either carrying negative connotations or Western ideas I need to find words that are meaningful to describe what I want to describe. I wish that I could use the same terms as all the women of this study use and refer to in their interviews. But there is a multitude of voices and they speak in different tunes, as I will show in the chapter on my empirical study and analysis. I as a researcher can’t jump between using gay, lesbian, mitliyya<sup>95</sup> or “women into women”. And since the word lesbian is used by the women more than any other term, this is the reason for my choice.

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<sup>91</sup> This is pronounced as shaz/shaza in egyptian dialect. The letter *dh* turns into *z* in this specific word, as it does in many others – but not all.

<sup>92</sup> Massad, J A. 2007, page 109.

<sup>93</sup> Habib, S. 2008, page 17.

<sup>94</sup> Both Habib, Massad and Whithaker uses this definition.

<sup>95</sup> This is how the word is pronounced in Egyptian dialect. The *th* turns rather into an ordinary *t*.

## 3. Method

Here I will describe the methods I have used in this thesis. I will explain how I conducted the interviews and the guidelines I have followed during my research. I will also have a critical discussion on the choice of English as the interview language. I will also discuss my position as a researcher and describe how I have used solidarity interviews and reflexivity to truly use the relational aspects of the in-depth interview.

### 3.1 Pioneering research

There is no quantitative study of this group, and therefore there are no statistics to rely on. Since it is both technically and legally impossible to conduct any kind of quantitative study I will solely focus on qualitative research, which will provide me with other answers. The lack of information, news or reports about lesbians in Egypt makes this research study pioneering.

### 3.2 In-depth interviews

I have done qualitative in-depth interviews with five women who love and have relationships with women. This method gives me stories and examples of experiences that together give a deeper insight into the lives of these women.

Because of the situation in Egypt I promised the informants in this study total anonymity. The only way I could conduct this study was by obscuring the interviewee's identities.<sup>96</sup> Anonymity was also a way of getting stories that otherwise would have been too personal or revealing to tell. I was clear about the aim of the interviews in my interactions with the informants. I was also clear that being interviewed was voluntary and that they could change their minds in the process.<sup>97</sup> One woman initially agreed to be interviewed, later stated that she would only be interviewed without any recording devices (something I agreed on) to finally pull out of the interview all together, a decision that I respected. She said that I could use her story anyway and that I could ask her anything while we were chatting and having coffee. She is therefore part of this study in the sense that she has given me knowledge through my participant observation that I use when I analyze my material, but she is not one of the interviewees.

This is not a journalistic article about five individuals, I will attempt to draw some conclusions on a more abstract level of how these women's voices together offer a picture of lesbian existence in Egypt.

I have chosen pseudonyms for the women, to make it easier for the reader to follow the women's stories (rather than creating distance by calling them Person 1, Person 2 etc). This way it is clearer that there are people behind the quotes.

In my field work I have used:

- 1) (participant) observations
- 2) semi-structured interviews

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<sup>96</sup> Kvale, Steinar. 1997/2001. *Den kvalitative forskningsintervjun*, Lund, Studentlitteratur, page 109

<sup>97</sup> Kvale, S. 1997/2001, page 107.

### 3) reflexivity

With participant observations, I had the opportunity to interact with the women and hear their mutual discussions. These insights gave me a broad understanding that was necessary when I started with the interviews. It helped me formulate my themes and also to validate how important certain issues were for these women.

I conducted semi-structured interviews.<sup>98</sup> This way the informants could reply with their own words and the only way I interfered was through presented themes. The themes that I chose were History, Identity, Reactions, Fears and Hopes<sup>99</sup>. These themes were given to the interviewees before the interview and were in front of us on a paper during the interview.<sup>100</sup> This way we could both focus on the central themes, and get back to them even if the conversation wandered off to other topics. I see this “wandering off” as positive since it gave me new insights that the preliminary field study hadn’t given me. But to be able to compare the interviews and to find similarities and contradictions I had to make sure that a minimum of topics were dealt with in every single interview. This method gave me a vast material with a lot of new entries which I hopefully can explore more in future studies.

I use listening as my primary role as researcher. But even if I talk very little during the interviews I consider myself as one partner in a conversation. My role has been to listen and then ask follow up questions to make sure that I really understand the stories that the women are telling me. My interaction is focused on helping the interviewee to formulate her own narrative.<sup>101</sup> I ended all the interviews by asking if there was anything else they wanted to add that I had missed or that didn’t fit into any of my themes.

All the interviews – but one – were digitally recorded and then transcribed by myself. These transcriptions are in my possession. One of the women didn’t want her voice recorded so I did the interview with her taking extensive notes and then directly afterwards, when her words were still fresh in my mind, I used my notes to transcribe the interview.

### 3.3 Language

The interviews were done mainly in English. I speak Arabic, but the women I interviewed were all very good at English and excelled my level of Arabic, which made English the common language to communicate with each other. They had knowledge of my level of Arabic and I also offered some of them to have the interview done in Arabic. We still ended up speaking English, but sometimes they were jumping between the languages. I never had any problem following them between English, Arabic and occasional French words.

When talking about religion more Arabic words, phrases and sentences slipped into the stories. I analyze this to be because of the “original” language of the subject. They all were taught about religion

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<sup>98</sup> Dalen, Monica. 2004/2008. *Intervju som metod*, Gleerups, page 31.

<sup>99</sup> The answers on the themes Reactions, Fears and Hopes are barely visible in this paper. This material contains many interesting angles that I, due to the limitations of this Bachelor Thesis, have saved for future research.

<sup>100</sup> The paper that was shown to the informants before and during the interviews is an Appendix, last in this thesis.

<sup>101</sup> Hydén, Margareta. 2000. ”Forskningsintervjun som relationell praktik”, ur Haavind, Hanne (ed.), *Kön och tolkning – Metodiska möjligheter i kvalitativ forskning*, Natur och Kultur.



using Arabic and they may never have discussed religion using English before. On the other hand, when talking about sexuality, many of them seemed to have no reason for using Arabic vocabulary. The reason for this is probably that these women all had read, written or chatted in English on this subject.

Maybe the preference for English was due to the sensitivity of the subject; it could be argued that using a foreign language created a distance, which might have made it easier to talk about sexuality, but my material doesn't show a totally clear picture, there are some inconsistencies to this division in subjects.

The authors behind the book project *Bareed Mista3jil*<sup>102</sup> chose to write the stories in English and then translate from English into Arabic. It may seem to be a detour for a group of women all living in Lebanon, speaking Arabic, but they themselves explain that English created a distance that made it easier to work with the sensitive subjects.

“When we began the process of translation into Arabic, we were faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality. The words didn't exist to express exactly what we wanted them to.”<sup>103</sup>

I have the same view, knowing that interviewing in English gives different answers, and maybe longer and more elaborate than Arabic would render. But the problem still exists of using foreign words for self presentation which would confirm Massad's point that the women are “Westernized”.

I have, for the readers of this paper, translated most Arabic words and phrases into English except when special terms were used in Arabic. Words such as *Allah*, or *haram* are not explained since I regard them as part of common knowledge. But specific terms such as *mithliyya*, *shadh* or *suhaqiyya* are explained last in the chapter on Theory. Other small words are left in the text, but explained in footnotes.

In my transcription of the interviews I have also made small changes for clarity and to make the text easier to read. I have kept the women's quotes as intact as possible.

Writing this paper in English is also a conscious strategy. This way I don't have to put the women's quotes through a filter of translation. It also gives me the delicate opportunity to be read by the very women I have interviewed. This knowledge of being read is both positive, in the sense that it puts the interviewees on a level where they can challenge my analysis, but it could also be seen as negative, in the sense that it may limit me since I have a will to give justice to all of them and please them. I am trying to be independent at the same time as I show my deep respect for the women I interviewed.

All the women of this study have had the opportunity to read this paper before publication.

### 3.4 Narratives

This study will not give answer to quantitative questions but will focus on qualitativity, by using a narrative method. This communicative method is conducted by oral communication face to face. Their stories will tell us about these women's love and lives, and how they describe themselves and how they have reached this image of self.

“Life-stories, then, are narrated by people whose individual knowledge and experiences of self always take place in

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<sup>102</sup> Meem (ed.). 2009. *Bareed Mista3jil – True Stories*, published in Beirut, Lebanon by Meem.

<sup>103</sup> Meem (ed.). 2009, page 6.

relation to others as well as being shaped by general circumstances. Women’s autobiographical accounts and self-narrative are never just private and subjective...”<sup>104</sup>

I will therefore see how my informants recount events, reactions and situations from their lives. This can also be seen as individual historiography, choosing from the plurality of personal past experiences to narrate parts that are put together and retold to create stories of where the person is today, why she is here and where she is going.

### 3.5 My position as researcher

Before going to Cairo I was concerned about how I as a Western woman would be able to see and understand these women. Knowing that my knowledge, background and unconscious prejudice could serve as obstacles to my perception of important things, I also realized that it could affect the way the women would interact with me and what kind of answers I would be able to get. bell hooks<sup>105</sup>, and many more, have shown the need to scrutinize research done by white women on non-white women from the ethical consequences it may lead to.<sup>106</sup>

This is a point that I have kept in mind. What I realized during the research process was that I also had to take into account the familiarity and friendship that grew out of my meetings with these women. As a presupposition I had to somehow convince them that they could trust me. Because of the sensitive subject and these women’s fears I had to prove that I was not a state agent or someone assigned by the police as *agent provocateur*. To do that I had to share stories from my own life. The meetings that led up to the actual interviews became more and more regular gatherings where I was considered one of the friends. I also became more and more involved in these women’s lives and got to witness joy, heartache, a birthday celebration and a break-up. I have laughed, cried and been shocked by some of their stories and consequently I have also undergone a process. I also acknowledge that my personal friendships with these women have coloured this research. I do not see it as a drawback, but instead as a source of knowledge.

On the other hand I probably influenced them in the same way as they influenced me. This is something I have tried to analyze and detect in the interviewees answers. Maybe they said things they thought I wanted to hear? Maybe they said things because they thought that I wouldn’t understand them otherwise?

Two of the women agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they afterwards could interview me. I agreed to this, which made the research processes more of a mutual give and take, than just a one way investigation. This general perspective on the interview is what has been termed solidarity interviews<sup>107</sup>.

My position can be seen as beginning on the outside to slide slightly towards inside. I have taken this into account by seeing that sometimes I’m treated as an outsider to whom some things have to be put in certain words, while at other times I’m being treated as an insider, to whom all things don’t have to be explained, as I’m assumed to know and have felt them myself. I had to constantly remind myself that even

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<sup>104</sup> al-Ali, N. 2000, page 90.

<sup>105</sup> Note on spelling: bell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, who has chosen to spell it without capitals.

<sup>106</sup> hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking back – thinking feminist – thinking black*, Boston, South End Press, page 43.

<sup>107</sup> Avrahami, Dina. 2007. *Vi dansar inte på bordet: lesbiska invandrarkvinnor i Sverige: stigmatisering & stolthet*, Pickabook Förlag, page 33.

if I thought that I DID understand what they meant, I also had to have it on tape. “You know what I mean” is not enough as an answer and nothing that I could just assume that I did.

### **3.6 Fieldwork, building trust**

The connecting person for me was the blogger Emraa Methlya<sup>108</sup>, who trusted me. For this I am for ever grateful.

“If you are coming to Cairo I don’t mind being in contact with you, I just have to be sure that you are who you are saying. It’s not safe to meet anybody./.../It happened in the past many times that the police here played with gay men and arrested them this way. /.../ So it’s risky that I trust anyone.”

That gave me four months of emails going back and forth between us. This built the trust that later was crucial in the meeting with her in Cairo. It also served as a preliminary minor field study that helped me formulate my interview themes as Emraa Methlya gave me an insight to the problems at stake. During these mail-conversations I grasped the sensitivity of the subject of homosexuality in Egypt and I also got her personal accounts, which were crucial for me to choose the themes of the interviews.

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<sup>108</sup> <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> The words Emraa (woman) and Methlya (female sameness) is the closest translation of lesbian. More on terms under the chapter Theory.

## 4. The informants

To carry out this research, I interviewed five women who have relationships with other women, to explore how they describe their sexual identities, reactions they’ve met and fears of what a revelation of sexuality could lead to. I will deal with the interviewee’s narratives together; I want to see them collectively and not just individually. It also gives me the possibilities of showing contradictions and disparate positions within my material.

Since I use extensive quotation the reader will hopefully be able to read the women as separate individuals – and still benefit from the dialogue I create between them.

First I will give a short presentation of all the women, trying to give a picture of their living circumstances, which will be important to interpret their stories and quotes. Then I will explain how I found and selected them. Finally I will have a short discussion on religion and class.

### 4.1 Presentation of the women

**Khadidja**<sup>109</sup> is the oldest of the women in my study. She is 32 and lives on her own and works as an engineer. This is quite rare and the reason she has succeeded in gaining this kind of autonomy is because she has been married and now is divorced and her parents live in another town of Egypt. By getting herself a job in Cairo she could convince her family to let her move away from home and live on her own. Her parents are not as well educated as she is so she can be seen as having done a shift in class.

**Negma** is 23 and still a student although she is working at the same time. She is living with her mother and sibling in Cairo. Her father works, as many Egyptians do, in Saudi Arabia. He only comes to Egypt to live with the family one month every summer, when he has his vacation. This means that Negma lives a different life depending on whether her father is in Egypt or not. Her mother is very open minded and lets Negma go out on her own late at night.

**Sarah** is a student of 21, working on the side. She lives with her parents and sibling. She has strict curfews and has to be at home at seven in the evening most of the time. She has clear dreams of making a career and working hard. Her family seems to encourage this and it seems she uses her evenings at home for studying and working.

**Leila** is a 26 year old working woman who lives with her mother in Cairo. Her parents have been divorced for many years and Leila is now earning the money to support her mother, who is ill. Leila is being pressured by her mother to marry. The last time this happened she called her father to convince her mother not to marry her off. Although she is the one earning the money, she has to hand her salary over to her mother and therefore has limited power.

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<sup>109</sup> The name Khadidja and the rest of the names used here are all pseudonyms that I have come up with. Any similarity with women named like this is just a coincidence. I made special efforts to find names that no one of all my acquaintances in Cairo has, that’s why the name Khadidja may seem out of date, or the name Negma is more of a description than a name. I let Sarah choose her alias herself, after she had found the name I’d chosen “ugly” and something “she couldn’t identify with”.

**Mariam**, 20 years old, is the youngest of the women I interviewed. She is also the only one of them who is a Christian. She is a student living with her mother and siblings. Her father is dead but her older brother still lives at home. The fact that her father is dead is something that she herself admits gives her greater responsibilities.

## **4.2 Selection**

I have contacted the women through the Internet. I have searched both blogs and via facebook and I found one woman who replied, the woman behind the blog Emraa Methlya<sup>110</sup>. After four months of correspondence through emails I went to Egypt and there she agreed to meet me face to face. She trusted me and later introduced me to Negma, who is the centre of a social network. Through Negma I eventually met the rest of the women that I interviewed. I met many women on these gatherings, but only asked for an interview with women that I had had the opportunity to talk with more than once. I made this active selection for two reasons. Firstly, I would have ended up with too much material for a Bachelor thesis, since I met some 20 women altogether. So I had to limit the amount of interviews. Secondly, it was important to build trust and to do that I had to personally ask every woman.

## **4.3 Representativity**

The women I have found are not representative of the whole spectrum of lesbian life in Egypt. Since this research is pioneering research I have no possibility of finding the representative, nor the purely unique, there are no earlier studies to use as a reference. The five women I interviewed fall, all of them, into these categories:

- 1) educated**
- 2) middle class**
- 3) technology wise**
- 4) living in Cairo**
- 5) following their desires**
- 6) part of the same network**

## **4.4 Class**

All the women in the study can be described as middle class, since they all have higher education. They all come from backgrounds where their families may have worked hard but have managed to create good living conditions. None of them come from hardship and poverty, and on the other hand none of them come from a family with abundant wealth. By studying well and getting an education the women of this study can create some space for themselves. According to their stories they are not forced to marry at an early age, education and career take some pressure off them. These women can in this perspective be seen

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<sup>110</sup> <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> Found online 2009-07-12. The words Emraa (woman) and Methlya (female sameness) is the closest translation of lesbian. More on terms under the chapter Theory. This is her own transcription from Arabic, and although I will use another way of transcribing Arabic I have chosen to keep her name written that way throughout the paper.

as being positioned between two different contradictory systems. On the one hand they have a good possibility of making a career and earning money in a way their mothers seemingly didn't have. They can be economically independent both of their fathers and any husbands. Yet, on the other hand, they are expected to marry and stop working, as many other women in the same class position – their sisters for example. Khadidja's sisters have married and had children but Khadidja has managed to negotiate some space for herself and she is permitted to continue working after her divorce.

Even though they may earn their living and be economically independent, they are still socially linked to their families and socially dependent. These women may earn enough money to run their own lives but Leila for example is 26 and she still has to give her salary to her mother. Other women tell a different story than Leila's, noting that their personal power increased when they started earning their own money and their parents became less strict when it came to curfews, for example.

Parents still want their daughters to marry, not just for survival and being cared for economically by a husband, but also to not be “alone”.

#### 4.5 Religion

Four of the five women I interviewed are Muslims, and one is Christian.<sup>111</sup> They all stress their faith, to show that they indeed are believers. It seems to me that they stress religion mostly in reaction to allegations against homosexuals, portraying them as Satanists and non-believers.

“They will say that it is *haram* and they will start talking about religion. I myself am religious, I pray and my friends also pray.” (Leila)

From my interviews and observations, I would suggest that differences between Christians and Muslims are minimal or even nonexistent in this context. Regardless of religious affiliation, all the women meet similar difficulties in Egypt and both the Muslim community and the Christian community in Egypt condemn homosexuality.

The interviews suggest that a more interesting issue for future research would be to look into how they are interpreting their religion and whether they see themselves as committing wrongs or not. Coming to terms with your sexuality often puts doubts on other things in life, such as faith. All the women in this study have gone through some kind of process where their faith has been put to the test. This means that they have thought a lot about faith. They also formulated, in their own words, their faith and sometimes studied religion very closely, in a way that they could claim to have more knowledge than the average Egyptian. Khadidja, for example, is annoyed by the fact that her family's religiosity is ignorant.

“When you see deeply what they actually know about Islam, then you find nothing but this stuff of praying and reading the *Quran*. They don't have this deep thinking about it because, *yaeni*<sup>112</sup>, for example simple things, when she considers me *kafra*<sup>113</sup>... I mean she doesn't know anything! I consider them as ignorant, actually. Until now

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<sup>111</sup> A representation that is close to the actual percentages of Muslims and Christians in Egyptian society.

<sup>112</sup> *yaeni* = it means.

<sup>113</sup> *kafra* = non believer (feminine gender)

they consider me, all the time, as evil. They are accusing me that I am not... that I am *athée*<sup>114</sup>. (Khadidja)

My informants's interpretations and understandings of religion and faith is a huge field that could give new perspectives to religious debates, but that I have no space for in this Bachelor thesis.

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<sup>114</sup> *atheé* (french) = atheist

## 5. Empirical study and analysis

In this chapter I will look into how the women of this study describe themselves. By examining the narratives I will see how their identities are formed and how different themes appear as important in this process of identity forming.

After that I will look into the women's narratives on reactions they've experienced. By doing this I show the women's own accounts of event and how they argue against the image of the lesbian woman.

### 5.1 Split between sex and love?

Massad sees an innate difference between the West's notion of gay and lesbian identities and the practices in the Middle East, which he sees as acts or conducts, that don't constitute identities.

All the women I interviewed had been or were currently engaged in relationships. For them their lives were revolving very much around their sexuality, in the sense that they saw themselves as "into women" both emotionally and erotically. None of them made any split or division in this area, although they all had their own personal identities and views of themselves. Instead they made a point of taking a stand against views that being lesbian just meant sex. Mariam's words can be seen as a response to Massad:

"Most people just think about lesbians as sexual relationships, they don't know that there are couples and that we are having feelings, we are talking, we are friends, just like straight couples. Most of the stupid people I met think that lesbians are just enjoying the sex. That's wrong. Some of the lesbians do it for sex, of course not all of them are thinking my way. But it's just like the straight ones! Some are just in for sexual pleasure; some are committed to someone with marriage and so on. The image of lesbians is that there are two girls doing something illegal and *haram* and it's not accepted. Narrow minded people!" (Mariam)

When the women described their lives they all lingered on love experiences and presented their desires for romantic relations. This was in no sense contradictory to sexual desires or experiences. They have all combined romance and sex. The women interviewed show different degrees on a multifaceted scale where Leila talks mostly about romance and Mariam talks mostly about sex, but she also emphasizes the desire for a relationship that will include both. The women have their individual images of their dream woman and the ultimate relationship, but they all reject the notion of female-female sexual acts as merely a sexual practice. None of them want to divide sexuality and love, they all see the feelings and desires as integrated. One could argue that the women in my study have some reasons for claiming identities and rejecting descriptions of practice.

Sarah has not told anyone in her family, and she wishes it to remain that way. But her big love, Farida, told her sister:

"Farida called me and told me that she had told her sister and I said 'I'll never come to her house again!' We were very good friends before and then the first time after she knew I could not look into her eyes. She started the conversation: 'Ok, Sarah, as Farida's sister I don't like my sister to be like this, but I'm leaving her like this and I'm accepting it. Because from day one when I saw you I knew that you loved her so much and you will never hurt her.'



That was a very great reaction.” (Sarah)

Sarah recounts her first reaction of the revelation, to never come to Farida’s house again. Then she shows that the fears she had didn’t come true. Farida’s sister is in her story hesitantly accepting the relationship, because she knows how much Sarah loves Farida. It’s a beautiful little story Sarah tells, how her strong love could make someone accept that very same love. The story shows her deep will of being accepted and it also shows that she is trying hard to prove that her love for women is truly deep – something she puts forward as a reason for acceptance.

Mariam (above) also expresses a will to be accepted and that may be the reason she dresses her arguments in the clothes of heterosexuality, the notion that lesbian women “are just like heterosexuals”. Maybe they are modelling their relationships on a heterosexual norm, thinking that this would ease understanding and acceptance in society. It may very well be so, but besides their own political views on the matter, their personal life-stories affirm the view that they are in fact building relationships on both sexual and emotional desires.

## 5.2 Coming to terms

CL: I have to ask you, *mithliyya*, this is the term that you prefer to use?

Khadija: This is part of my identity, yes. I insist to use *mithliyya* and not *shaz*, because you know, *shaz* is negative.

The women I interviewed may use different labels and terms or none at all, but still talk about their lives so that it is clear that their sexual and emotional desires have shaped how they see themselves. This is, in my point of view, forming identities.

Realizing that one’s desires differ from the norm, and that feelings can’t be labelled heterosexual, and then embracing this is all part of the process of coming to terms with one’s sexuality. The process of “coming out” has been discussed at length and the stage before “taking the step out of the closet” is this naming of one self. This process can be long or short, and more or less difficult. Seen from a social constructionist perspective the process is a result of the individual’s interpretations of self in different situations and positioning of self within social and cultural constructions.<sup>115</sup>

The women in this study have different descriptions. Khadija was struggling with the realization that she had desires for women. Her first step was to see this desire, but decide not to live it out, to repress and contain the feelings, because she had realized that it was something *haram*, forbidden.

Negma’s coming to terms was not easy either but it happened earlier in her life and she ended up writing poetry to put her feelings on paper, to grasp it.

“...and thus I finally believed  
that she and she can definitely be” (Negma)

Mariam on the other hand tell a story of a very easy coming to terms. She doesn’t talk about any greater struggle.

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<sup>115</sup> Lundahl, P. 1998, pages 21-22.

“I wanted to try. I wanted to know, to translate what was on my mind into actions. About these feelings I had - are they just illusions or am I really like that? I started dating girls, I started going out with girls and I started to be convinced that it’s emotionally, physically and psychologically. I was convinced of who I am. It’s not just something that I try.” (Mariam)

When the women talk about themselves and their sexuality they choose words like “homosexual”, “lesbian”, “mithliyya” or just describe themselves as being “into women”. Khadidjas description:

“For me it’s women who are attracted emotionally and sexually to women. For me this is a good definition, but I don’t know if lesbian is this. And lesbian I don’t like the word. But *mithliyya* I like, it’s ok.” (Khadidja)

Leila uses the word lesbian in the interview, but when we get to the theme of sexual identity she states:

“I don’t like labels. I see myself as into girls in a romantic way.” (Leila)

Mariam also rejects labels and names and prefer to just see it as a taste or as an attraction for women.

“I don’t like names; I’m just having a different taste. It’s like food, you like pasta, I like pizza, you prefer males, I prefer females. But if I have to label myself, then okay, I’m gay. It’s no big deal.” (Mariam)

In other discussions Mariam uses the word homosexual as well. Sarah uses both the word lesbian and the word homosexual, so does Negma.

Massad could be seen as correct when he assumes that people in the Middle East who see themselves as gay, homosexual, lesbian or queer have borrowed these terms from the West or, in the case of *mithliyya*, translated it. My informants all reject the older Arabic terms, such as *shaza* or *suhaqiyya*, because these terms all have negative connotations. Choosing English terms or inventing new ones in Arabic is to try to find a term that they are comfortable with.

The collective Meem in Lebanon has been dealing with the same questions in their book *Bareed Mista3jil*:

“Sadly, and for the lack of Arabic expressions, queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identity in English or French because that’s where these words exist more freely and where we find internet pages and papers written about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab becomes increasingly difficult.”<sup>116</sup>

When it comes to finding appropriate words to describe sexuality, the same problems occur in Egyptian colloquial dialect, as the Meem collective describe above regarding Lebanese.

“In the Arab world, however, the lesbian identity doesn’t seem to exist, not because there are no lesbians, but because practices, which might be termed as lesbian in Western culture are left nameless in the Arab culture. Taking into consideration that the word ‘lesbian’ is rarely used in Arabic, and once used, it is charged with negative connotations, most lesbians avoid any public assertion of their identities.”<sup>117</sup>

This is verified by the interviews in my study. Their narratives speak of lesbian identities, even though they may have problems finding a suitable term. They all reject the negative terms, they may find it awkward to use a foreign word and the term *mithliyya* is newly invented, but still they describe lifestyles full of sexual love-relationships with other women.

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<sup>116</sup> Meem (ed.). 2009, *Bareed Mista3jil*, page 6 f.

<sup>117</sup> Al-Ghafari, Iman. 2003, page 86.

### 5.3 Passing and acting straight

All the women in this study manage to pass as heterosexual, but the fears of what may or what could happen, still play a huge role in their lives. And some of the fears are the actual reasons that they haven't told people, and therefore haven't had the bad reactions directed against them.

The women show different degrees of fear for what could happen or what the reactions would be if people knew, they also express resistance and a will to overcome such obstacles.

"If society would really know about me I would be rejected. And people can really harm me. In the street, if they know you are a lesbian, just like anywhere else, you can be beaten. And be treated very badly, in the school, everywhere." (Sarah)

These fears are the reasons they chose to pass as heterosexuals.

As part of my observations the story of Suzzie was told by different people and during the length of my stay in Cairo. It's about a Christian woman, who had, as my friends put it, "been stupid enough to tell her family", she had made her sexuality visible. The family reacted just as everyone expected and took her out of university and it was said that they sent her to a monastery. No one heard anything from her for more than a month, but her mother was convinced that she should find and take revenge on the girl that her daughter had had an affair with, Sarah. This shows the real dangers these women face.

The mother first called Sarah's parents and told them that their daughter was a Satanist and a lesbian, and that she had turned her daughter Suzzie the same way. Sarah had to convince her parents of her straightness by telling them about an alleged boyfriend.

"I experienced my family when they heard the rumour; they just laughed and said 'Why do people do this to us? We are good people, why do they talk like this about our daughter?' They consider it as a complication and they know that I'm a normal person. You have to be a psycho to be like this and I'm normal, so I'm ok." (Sarah)

After this incident the mother of Suzzie showed up at Sarah's faculty at university and talked with her professors telling them as well that Sarah was a Satanist and a lesbian. She was urging them to throw Sarah out of school. All this could definitely have ruined Sarah's life if it wasn't for the fact that she is an ambitious student and her teachers like her. They therefore chose not to believe the mother, but Sarah. One of the teachers had according to Sarah's story said: "No, we know Sarah and she is no Satanist." So for Sarah it was a good thing that the mother had clumped Satanism and lesbianism together, as people could easily tell that Sarah is no Satanist and also saw the second claim as equally preposterous.

Sarah also told me that her friends at university were backing her up and defending her against these accusations, something that gave Sarah ambivalent feelings. On the one hand she needed the support for her career and future, but on the other hand it meant that she had to keep on passing as heterosexual.

"There is the rumour in my faculty that I'm a lesbian. But if anyone of my friends hear this they actually fight with the person and they say 'No, Sarah is not like this!' And I can't say to them: 'Hey guys, stop fighting for me because I might be a...'. Instead I say 'Thanks for fighting for me, thanks for backing me up.' My friends always deny it because if they are your friends they can't think of anything bad with me." (Sarah)

What she is discussing here is the way that she manages to pass as heterosexual. Her friends at the faculty are obviously sure that she is a straight girl. She has worked hard to be perceived this way, and it's crucial for her that she will pass. But when she succeeds with this passing she is still not happy about it. The way her friends are "backing her up" they are making her more straight, and even if she tries telling them they will deny it and keep on affirming her as heterosexual.

The main reason that no one seems to believe that Sarah is a lesbian is due to the general view on homosexuality. It is clear that the people around Sarah make their own assessments from what they know about Sarah. Since homosexuality is seen as either a mental problem, a disease or as a sinful, Satanist behaviour; Sarah doesn't fit this picture – and is saved by this.

The story of Suzzie was that she was sent to a monastery, but some months later Suzzie managed to get hold of a phone and text some of the women of the group. Suzzie had not been to a monastery, but a mental institution and after she was let out she tried to get in contact with the lesbian group. But all of the women I knew rejected that friendship – they explained that they were too afraid to have anything to do with Suzzie. Their sexualities have to be kept invisible; they have to keep on passing as heterosexual.

Leila also talks about the need for acting straight, but she has had better experiences and shows more hope about changing attitudes. In her point of view there is a difference between generations.

"I act so straight at my work that nobody would know, but I don't think that they would care about me even if they knew. Maybe older people have different ways of thinking, but the new generation will not interfere with ones personal life. /.../They are not accepting it, but it's just not that weird any longer." (Leila)

She is ambivalent, talking about "acting straight" as a necessity, and even thinking that she is good at this skill, of passing. We can hear her taking different positions in her narrative. I see this as trying her arguments and positions in the interview situation with me. It's as if she is going back and forth between positions of caution and boldness. Since she still acts straight she doesn't know exactly what would happen "if they knew", but she is imagining a scenario and analyzes a positive outcome.

Mariam is distinctly different from the other women I interviewed in that she has a more bold appearance. She is saying that she doesn't care how people will react and she is claiming the right to speak about whatever she wants and live her life the way she chooses without anyone being able to tell her what to do and what not to do. But these things are really what she wants and maybe not always the reality. She knows this herself, but still doesn't let that stop her. I think it has a lot to do with her self-image as the rebel. She is passing, but has an urge to be visible.

"I'm not trying to hide. Sometimes when I'm sitting in a taxi and talking my friend can tell me 'Mariam, your voice is too loud' But why? They can't come and ask me what I'm saying, the taxi driver, his business is to drive. I can say whatever I want. Maybe it's part of being a rebel. I do not fear anything; I'm just letting everything out. Because if I'm lying then I'm doing something wrong and I'm just not." (Mariam)

Here she describes her passing as "lying", and she sees this as wrong. She is tired of having to act a certain way. But as this quote shows, even talking too loud and talking about certain issues is breaking the norms. Mariam's way of acting is disturbing even when she doesn't break any given taboos.

## 5.4 Mother's reactions

The families, and especially the mothers', constitute a very important part of these women's lives. But at the same time the revelation of their sexualities could posit a threat.

All the women, except Mariam, when confronted have denied any homosexuality and quickly showed proof of a boyfriend. This of course assures their parents; still many of the women assume that their mothers somehow understand, although nothing has been said outright. And there is a fear of what could happen if it was to be said outright, so they keep it unsaid.

"Of course my mum has had her doubts for so long now. She is noticing my heartbreaks and she is seeing me crying. And she knows that I used to meet this friend all the time and suddenly she is out of my life and I am crying. Even if I have many guys as friends, and they keep on calling me, she feels that there is something wrong. But she never talked to me about it." (Leila)

Mariam actually did tell her mother, who did not take it seriously, which is similar to how Leila's mother has dealt with it. The denial aspect in Mariam's and Leila's stories show up in the other women's stories as well. Sarah:

"My mother once entered my room when I and Farida were on the bed making out. We were fully dressed and when she came in we started fighting with each other, as a joke. But my mother had her doubts about me, I know. But she never tried to talk to me about it, she just denied it. And she never liked Farida." (Sarah)

Negma told me of how she as a young teenager told her mother about her deep feelings for the singer Whitney Houston and her mother's reaction illustrates how she sees something wrong in her daughters' feelings.

"One day we were sitting with my mum and my sister said 'Mum, I want to tell you something'. And she told her that she always dreamt of Ronan Keating and she wished she could have him. My mum was laughing and saying that it can't be and that she should think of someone here. /.../ I said 'Ok, and I think that I have a crush on Whitney Houston!' My mum looked at me so shocked and said 'What?' 'Yes, I dream about her, the same thing that my sister talked about.' 'No! Are you insane?' She told me that it's not good, and that I can't think about her that way, because she is a girl 'And what are you expecting to be – a guy?' /.../ And she told me to stop doing this and I said Yes, but on the inside I knew that I can't because it's something I feel." (Negma)

Negma's mother even destroyed all of Negma's tapes and posters of Whitney Houston.

Khadidja has never told anyone in her family about her sexuality. Yet when her mother found love letters among Khadidja's things, her reaction was very aggressive, even though Khadidja denied everything and assured her mother that she was heterosexual.

"She understands that this is not really friendship letters. That there is something wrong, in her opinion. So she faced me and told me 'What is this? Are you in love with a woman?' She was very aggressive. First she gave me a lecture about the *Quran*, that I will be in hell and that I must ask God to forgive me, make my prayers. She was crying and she was very angry and she took all the things in our place and was throwing at me. /.../ She was throwing me with everything, everything. I was hiding and she was crazy, really. She broke everything and I was very afraid, and she said to me that she would kill me and that she would tell my father to kill me. She was really very serious and at that

time I was very scared and I tried to find a way even to leave.” (Khadidja)

Khadidja, who has a firm faith, denied everything and was forced by her mother to swear on the Quran.

## 5.5 Facing prejudice

All of the women have some friend or friends that they have told. But the process of telling and the importance of being cautious when choosing who you can tell is evident.

“I told two straight guys who are my friends. They reacted a little bit differently. /.../ The first one of them said that he didn’t care about my personal life and that he didn’t want to interfere with it. The other one believed that I just hadn’t met the right guy yet and after I told him he tried to hook me up with some guys that he knew.” (Leila)

Khadidja tells two different stories of friends’ reactions. Her first experience of telling someone was very bad:

“I did a big mistake to tell someone. She was a friend and I was thinking that I had to tell someone because I was feeling that ‘I can’t hold this all the time’. I told her that I love women and that I have a girlfriend. She was shocked and she started to cry and she was telling me: ‘Oh, you are a good girl and I don’t want you to be in hell. This is a big sin, you shouldn’t do that and *Allah* will be angry on you.’ So she started to find psychiatry for me everywhere. And she called one and she reserved a day for me. She said “You are sick, you have to get treatment.” And when I refused she told me that if ‘You don’t go I will tell your parents’.” (Khadidja)

But although this meant the end of their friendship, Khadidja still didn’t give up. And when she after this had a crush on one of her colleagues she decided to tell her and got a very good and accepting reaction from a woman who is heterosexual.

Mariam is the only one of the women who has told her mother anything. But before she told her mother her brother had already confronted her.

“My brother was the one who figured out about me and in the beginning he was against the issue and started telling me that I’m sick and that it’s wrong to have these feelings, even if I’m not having sex with girls it’s wrong to have feelings for a female. I didn’t care about what he said. I told him: ‘There is nothing wrong with me, and no reason to see a doctor.’” (Mariam)

The reason that Mariam in the end told her mother was to make her understand that Mariam is not into boys. This is interesting as it shows that the restrictions on women in Egypt concerns all sexuality, and Mariam is the only one who has chosen to deal with the discussion on homosexuality rather than the discussion on family’s fears of the daughters having heterosexual sex.

“I told my mother, because I didn’t want her to think that I was doing something that I wasn’t doing. She was thinking that I was going out with guys and having sex with guys. So I said, ‘Stop saying this, I’m not doing any of that, I’m into girls, I love girls and I’ll marry a girl.’ She reacted in two ways. Sometimes she said ‘No, stop saying that, stop lying to me. You are just saying that to cover what you are doing.’ /.../ And sometimes she is saying ‘You are wrong, this is crazy, you have to stop this.’ So she has two different reactions. One part of her believe and one part of her want to deny.” (Mariam)

Sarah has told her best friends and her inner gang, but she also told me how she was provoked to tell one of her friends, a straight guy who was interested in her. When Sarah retold the story she gave me an

insight into the reaction by acting the dialogue that had taken place between them after she had told him that she is lesbian.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| “He was looking at me and asked:                 | - Yes, of course I’m good.                              |
| - Lesbian means that you sleep with girls?       | - You never tried men.                                  |
| - Yes!   | - Yes I did!  |
| - It means that you don’t like guys?             | - Please come back! Sarah, it’s a phase, you will pass. |
| - Yes! Stop rephrasing it! That’s what it means. | - Go home, I don’t want to talk to you.” (Sarah)        |
| - But why? You’re good.                          |   |

This is her memory of the dialogue, that is, her present version of it. No matter if the event took place as she recalls or not, what she gives an example of is the kind of reactions that she has experienced, the usual prejudice. In this short dialogue the guy is portraying his knowledge of lesbian sexuality by testing three different theories:

- 1) Lesbian women are not good.
- 2) Women turn lesbian because they haven’t tried men.
- 3) Being lesbian is a phase that will pass.

Sarah at the same time rejects all of these statements and her narrative of the event could be interpreted as an answer to all incorrect prejudice about lesbian women in the Egyptian society.

Through stories and media the view on homosexuality is performed and made clear. Friends’ stories about cases they heard of are, together with the media, are the kind of tales that make up the backdrop of discussions on homosexuality. Stories illustrate what have happened to other homosexuals in Egypt and this is how the women are told that homosexuality is wrong.

“I just hate the looks they have on homosexuality. I don’t like that, there is no respect.” (Mariam)

“My friend told me once about a woman that she knew. When she was about 30 years old her parents discovered that she is a lesbian. They took her to the hospital, the mental hospital. My friend told me that they didn’t even take her to a psychiatrist; they just put her in a mental hospital, because they thought she had something wrong in her head. So my friend told me to be aware, not to show anyone.” (Khadidja)

Khadidja was herself forced to see a psychiatrist by one of her friends, an experience that was very bad. In his role as a psychiatrist his reaction is typical for how society at large sees homosexuality and it gave Khadidja a clear picture, which she rejected.

“He started to ask me questions about what I did in bed with my girlfriend, and how many times we did it. And he told me, ‘Yes, I know these people who do that, they are very sick like you. And sometimes they also go to toilets and pick up guys, men do that.’ He had a very corrupted image. He was the sick one, not me. It was all on sexual things. Like this is the problem, sex, sex, sex. He couldn’t think that this is not about sex. So at the end of our discussion, this stupid discussion, I shouted at his face and I told him ‘You don’t understand anything and I will not come again here.’ And I just went out and I slammed the door.” (Khadidja)

What Leila dislikes the most in societies view of lesbian women is the stress on sexuality, that lesbian women are overly sexual and that if the subject is raised it will automatically revolve around sex.

“Most people here joke about girls being with girls, but the jokes are so weird. For them they joke about it sexually, for example ‘Where is the tool in a girl?’” (Leila)

This confirms the general view in society that being lesbian is just practising a sinful kind of sex.

The blogger Emraa Methlyya’s reaction to the film “Bidoun Riqaba”<sup>118</sup> – both in our discussion after the film and in her own review of the film on her blog<sup>119</sup> – shows how she labels this image as negative:

الصورة المقدمة في الفيلم هي أن المثلية جنس بس و أن المرأة بكل الأحوال لا يكمن [sic] ان نستغنى عن الرجل حتى لو  
بتنام مع بنات و هي طبعاً الصورة اللي يحبها أوي الرجال المشاهدين<sup>120</sup>

She clearly dismisses views on lesbians as purely sexual deviants with aggressive sexual conducts. Her reaction contradicts how Joseph A. Massad describes the sexual, but not emotional, practice in the Middle East. In Emraa Methlyya’s words, his view is a distortion similar to the negative view on lesbians as when portrayed as sexual deviants in the example of the film. Emraa Methlyya’s analysis that the film states that women in the end can’t make it without men is interesting. The women interviewed had met similar kind of reactions and views.

## 5.6 Negating segregation as reason

All the women I interviewed had given men one or more chances, which means that they had tried to date a man, in vain. They had all had boyfriends, or had been engaged or, as in Khadidja’s case, even married. Khadidja was convinced to marry after consulting IslamOnline, asking about her feelings for a woman. The imam’s solution was simple: Get married.

“I was thinking that when I get married I will be ok and feel like everyone. I will do it for *Allah*, for my parents. Even my girlfriend is telling me the same thing, that I have to try, and maybe I will be like everyone.” (Khadidja)

Khadidja describes how her marriage was a disaster and that she had to get a divorce in the end, because she couldn’t stand being married.

“My marriage experience was the big turning point to be sure that I really couldn’t be a hetero.” (Khadidja)

Khadidja’s story definitely goes against the belief that same sex practices can be “cured” by heterosexual marriage or that same sex practices is something people turn to when they are denied access to licit sexuality. The rest of the women I interviewed had also given heterosexuality one or more chances. What they all have in common is describing the lack of attraction or desire for men.

Sarah for example tells a story of how she tried dating a man after her first girlfriend.

“He kissed me and I figured out that it’s not the same thing and I freaked out! Fine, I’m a lesbian! No, I’m not! I have to try it again. Maybe I’m not in the mood. /.../ After kissing he tried to make out with me so I was ‘No, no, no, I don’t feel anything. I don’t like it and I don’t want you.’ So I pushed him. When he asked why I couldn’t reply. I couldn’t tell him ‘Because I’m a lesbian!’” (Sarah)

Sarah was comparing her feelings towards this man and the feelings she had had for her ex-girlfriend,

<sup>118</sup> Described in the Introduction.

<sup>119</sup> <http://emraamethlyya.blogspot.com/2009/02/blog-post.html> Found online 2009-07-24

<sup>120</sup> <http://emraamethlyya.blogspot.com/2009/02/blog-post.html> Found online 2009-07-24

My translation: The image represented in the film is that the lesbian is all about sex and that the woman in all cases can not make it without the man even if she sleeps with girls and this is of course the image very much loved by the male audience.



and in her story it is when she realizes the difference – that she didn't feel anything when the man was making out with her – that she "freaks out" and in her mind is telling herself that the reason is because she is a lesbian. So here it is not the segregation, but the exposure to heterosexuality that makes her "come to terms". Leila's description of her first kiss with a boy is similar, although her father found out and the kiss had consequences.

"When he started kissing me I didn't feel anything, just icky. And when he tried to do more I just pushed him away. /.../It also became a problem for my mother because when my father found out he didn't blame me; He blamed my mother for not raising me well. But the incident made me feel that I didn't want to be with a boy. I wanted to be with a girl." (Leila)

I see the experimenting with men as adaptations to society's expectations. We can use Adrienne Rich's terminology of compulsory heterosexuality here. The women know that marriage is what their parents are planning for them and they are trying to deal with this in different ways. Many of them have been thinking that maybe it's not that bad, that they can adapt to it, and so they put themselves to the test. But they all have experiences of "failing the test", of being more sure afterwards that they are not into men.

Negma's first love story ended with the two of them getting caught kissing in Saudi Arabia and the other women being expelled from the country.

"It was a really bad experience. I decided to be straight and started pushing myself to be with guys. I don't feel bad about guys, they are ok, but I'm too attracted to women, so guys won't do it. So every time when a guy got sexually attracted to me I turned away. /.../ My life was like this for a couple of years, but then I realized that this is not me and I'm just fooling myself, so I wrote that poem and I realized that I'm actually into women." (Negma)

Negma first doesn't view her early experience with a woman as something fundamental, instead she decides to turn to men after a "bad experience". But although she dates many different guys for about two years, she never gets the same feeling. She is kissing and making out with the guys, but she is not finding what she is looking for. It's after these years of trying men that she realizes that she is into women.

In many cases the will to conform make women go against their desire, but at a certain point they change their mind. They refer to it themselves as realizing being into women. These stories of coming to terms are of course all stories of the present past, this is how they see their own histories in the light of the life they lead today.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Reviewing the empirical findings

The lack of appropriate terms is evident, not just in my study but also in the works of Joseph A Massad and Samar Habib. They deal differently with the problem at hand. Massad's conclusion is that the term homosexuality is Western and refers to a certain identity that does not exist in the Middle East. Habib on the other hand chooses the term homosexuality to refer to stories of women loving women in historical accounts, long before the term homosexuality was invented.

I have positioned myself slightly differently by following Pia Lundahl's constructionist notion that the prerequisite for a lesbian identity is lesbian representations. By seeing it this way I believe that the choice of term is connected to the context and the cultural connotations that come with the term. It is interesting that all the women reject the common Egyptian terms *shaza* and *suhaqiyya*, since they are negative words that the women don't want to identify with.

When it comes to the use of terms such as gay, queer, dyke, they have all been negative words in the past, that have been reclaimed in the Anglo-Saxon world by the very people that they used to be thrown at<sup>121</sup>. It is a sort of self defence, which only works if the refilling of the words with positive meanings is done collectively. It's a process of revalorisation that needs the collectivity of for example Queer Nations action. None of the women in my study wanted to change the connotation of the words *shaza* or *suhaqiyya*. Their solutions were instead to either choose a foreign word such as gay, lesbian or homosexual or try to introduce a rather new Arabic word, *mithliyya*.

The material shows clearly that in self-naming there is diversity in names but every individual's interpretation of her choice of word or phrase, together makes up a whole picture of women identifying themselves as being homosexual.

As long as the women have to search for positive representations they will cling to the label that they find connected to this image. That is the reason they either haven't found a suitable word, jumps between different words or have chosen a specific one that they like.

On the surface it seems that Massad is right, as the women's coming to terms are due to images and representations from the West. Since the women of this study are searching for information they will "learn" about lesbian identities partly through the West and then identify with them. At the same time they resist the negative image of the lesbian woman by rejecting the terms *shaza* and *suhaqiyya*.

This does not mean, as Massad suggests, that they have become westernized just because they have chosen to use the word lesbian. It just means that Arabic lacks any similar word. Something that Habib shows, by finding old historic representations of female homosexuality. Even if they are not labelled homosexual or *mithliyya* they still contains the same representations of sexual and emotional

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<sup>121</sup> The same thing can be said about the Swedish words *bög* and *flata*, which nowadays have been reclaimed. In doing so the gay community has taken the edge out of old insulting nicknames.

relationships.

Emraa Methlya with her blog is actually creating such a contemporary Arabic Egyptian online representation, for other women to find when they search for positive images to identify with.

My material is contemporary and I have the women's own words to analyse the split in theories. My material clearly rejects Massad's theory that sexual identities are Western per se. Even if the women in my study do not choose the same term nor have a unison definition, they all have similar descriptions of their sexual history. These narratives of love stories and relationships with crushes, heart breaks and nervous first dates all give the image of sexual *identities*. To see this more clearly, a negation of all these experiences, feelings and relations would leave their lives totally different. One can not take all this away without totally altering their self-identities.

I have found nothing that would back Massad in his conviction that people in the Middle East just practice same-sex, without these acts being linked to a greater picture of identity.

Massad's theory is not applicable to my material, which may be due to the fact that he speaks about men and not women (although he claims that he does). I have not conducted any study with men who have sex with men, so Massad's accounts may have some truth on this group. I have merely focused on women having sex with women and my material contradicts Massad on all levels.

Habib on the other hand has focused exclusively on female homosexuality and her findings differ radically from Massad's. In my point of view this is because you can't be gender blind just because these people are breaking the heterosexual norm.

Massad and others have formed their view on same-sex activity from old texts by, for example, Abu Nuwas, who in his poetry praises the love of young boys. This is taken as the typical Middle Eastern approach to same-sex activity. But it has nothing in common with the informants of this study. Instead it could be said to constitute some of the prejudices that the women are trying to argue against.

Keeping something hidden out of fear, makes it hard for it to be seen. When it is indeed found it is explained away or punished by society. Since all the women of this study is passing, acting straight, they appear to the outside world to not have homosexual identities, and this passing is necessary. This strategy of passing may be one of the reasons why Massad doesn't see these identities.

Reading Massad through the material in this study will give a picture of him very much resembling the positions that my informants are struggling to reject.

It is indeed important to see that the women are tired and irritated over the general image of the lesbian woman, which they see as false. This image of perverted women only seeking sinful sexual pleasures is based on prejudice and stigmatizing, but is an identity label derived from a perception of sexual acts.

Their narratives and self-presentations become answers to society's image of the lesbian woman. In the interviews they take the chance to defend themselves against prejudice and false assumptions, in a way they can't in society, where they work hard on passing as heterosexual women to avoid repression. Their individual experiences of being aware of the surrounding norms and trying to live a life avoiding punishment reflects society and its level, or lack of, tolerance. And these experiences shape the identities.

My material shows a profound ambivalence due to the fact that the informants in this study have a will of passing, but an unwillingness of conforming. The women in my study basically want to be left alone, hoping that the rest of society or their families won't interfere with their lives. They even want to be left "in the closet" and the only one who speaks about changing the view of the community is Mariam, who nonetheless shows hesitation. Still I am inclined to see the women positioning themselves on a continuum of resistance. The passive resistance of passing is something they all are doing. Then the resistance to different heterosexual compulsions, the forces of the institutions, such as marriage, follows.

The women interviewed in this study are not essentially different from lesbian women in for example Sweden, but their context is different and therefore their self-presentations. One could argue that many of the problems they articulate are the same, as for example coming to terms in a hetero-normative society. I have had no intention of exotifying or victimizing the women I interviewed, but their situation is specific and can't be likened with just any other group of lesbian women.

## **6.2 Suggestions for further research**

Homosexual rights don't necessarily follow when human rights are being improved. There's more than one parameter that explains different societies varying attitudes and perceptions of homosexuality.

The legal rights for homosexuals in Sweden are due to all the activists that have been involved in demonstrations, lobbying and political claims. These rights are also thanks to all the people that have gradually "come out of the closet" with friends, family and the society at large. So the political and the personal struggles for a life and love have been part of creating a better climate.

But to understand Egypt we have to remember that in 1979 homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder in Sweden, 30 years later gay marriages are accepted. Acceptance of homosexuality is nothing "Western" in itself and can't be put in a bipolar position with a homophobic "Orient". Homosexual behaviour has a long history in the Arab world and as Samar Habib shows, there are examples of women marrying women in Medieval literature, which should silence any Western claims of being first to accept gay marriages. With this in mind we can see that women in Egypt today still have small or no possibilities of living as they desire. They have to pass as heterosexual women.

A comparison with Lebanon, which has the only active gay rights movement in the Arab world, would be interesting. It is not sure at all that Egypt will follow the same historical development as the Swedish case shows. Neither can we just copy the development in Lebanon and believe that it can be transferred to Egypt. Instead of seeing this linear development there are strings that can show us at least the will and struggle amongst the women in question. And that's where a comparison could be fruitful.

I want to finish this conclusion with the words of Mariam:

"Maybe some day they are going to make a wake up call to the community that 'We are here and we exist and we are humans just like you.' Maybe some day, who knows. But the reaction would be so tough, for sure, because we are in an undemocratic country – plus it's Islamic so I don't think homosexuality ever will be accepted. But what ever is acceptable or not – we are here, so what they are doing is not stopping anything or anyone." (Mariam)

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### 7.3 Radio

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### 7.4 Websites

**Ahbab – Gay and Lesbian Arab Society:**

<http://www.glas.org/ahbab/>

**A of Arabia uncut**

<http://aofarabia.blogspot.com/>

**Bareed Mista3jil:**

[www.bareedmista3jil.com](http://www.bareedmista3jil.com)

**Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights:**

<http://www.eipr.org>

**Emraa Methlya:**

<http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com>

**Encyclopedia Britannica:**

<http://www.britannica.com/>

**Gay Middle East:**

<http://www.gaymiddleeast.com/>

**Helem:**

<http://www.helem.net/>

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**Meem:**

<http://www.meemgroup.org/>

**The Queer Arabs blog:**

<http://queerarabs.blogspot.com/>



## **7.5 Primary interviews**

### **Interview 1 - Khadidja, 32**

Engineer, Muslim, divorced, living on her own.

Interview conducted 2009-03-24, in the living room of her apartment.

Documentation: Recording. Duration of the interview: 2h 36 min

### **Interview 2 - Negma, 23**

Student, Muslim, living with her family

Interview conducted 2009-03-26, in the living room of her apartment.

Documentation: Recording. Duration of the interview: 2 h 36 min

### **Interview 3 - Sarah, 21**

Student, Muslim, living with her family.

Interview conducted 2009-03-28 in the living room of my apartment.

Documentation: Recording. Duration of the interview: 1 h 27 min

### **Interview 4 - Leila, 26**

Working, with a Bachelor in fine arts, Muslim, living with her family.

Interview conducted 2009-04-12 in the living room of my apartment.

Documentation: Extensive note taking. Duration of the interview: app. 3 hours

### **Interview 5 - Mariam, 20**

Student, Christian, living with her family.

Interview conducted 2009-04-13 in the living room of my apartment.

Documentation: Recording. Duration of the interview: 0 h 48 min

## **7.6 Other interviews**

- Hossam Bahgat, director of EIPR, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

Conducted at his office 2009-02-11 and transcribed by me. Transcription in my possession.

- Mozn Hassan, from the feminist youth organisation Nazara (Vision)

Conducted in a café 2009-02-15, and transcribed by me. Transcription in my possession.

## **7.7 Observations**

- I saw the film "Bidoun Riqaba" together with the blogger Emraa Methlyya. 2009-02-07
- Several meetings with a larger group of women at different cafés in Cairo and at people's houses.

Observations made during a period of almost three months, from beginning of February 2009 until the end of April 2009

## **7.8 Appendix – Information given to the interviewees**

The information obtained during this interview will be published in a way so that your identity will be concealed.

Your name, and for example village's names or specific companies that you might mention, will also be changed by me, so that no one will be able to trace the person behind the quote.

Christina Lindström

## **Themes of the interview:**

### **1. Personal HISTORY**

### **2. Sexual IDENTITY**

### **3. REACTIONS from...**

...Society

...Family

...Friends

### **4. Your FEARS of...**

...Society

...Family

...Friends

### **5. HOPES**