

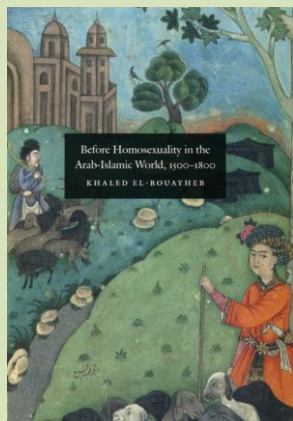
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KHALED EL-ROUAYHEB

Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800

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Khaled El-Rouayheb is the James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic and Islamic Intellectual History at Harvard University and his book *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World* is the product of his PhD thesis at Cambridge back in the early 2000s. The monograph delves into the various difficulties that pre-modern Islamic societies encountered when dealing with same-sex relations in both legal and cultural terms, and how scholars justified or dismissed these activities. Characterised by a strongly patriarchal culture, these societies openly condemned sodomy, as it was punished by Islamic law. However, the evidence presented by foreign travel accounts suggests that the practise was widely extended. Added to this, the rich literature of the period openly expressed the love and admiration for young beardless boys, evidencing the recurrent inconsistencies that Islamic societies faced during this period. The book aims to explain these contradictions at the same time it offers an original and up-to-date study of sexual attitudes in early modern Islamic societies through the analysis of the literature of the

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time. To do so, Khaled El-Rouayheb presents a wide range of original sources translated into English, from belletristic poetry to biographical dictionaries, that reveal to what extent male homosexual behaviour was permitted or censored. Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that the book only covers aspects related to pederastic relationships between an adult male and a young boy, leaving behind any possible relations that could occur between adults of the same sex. El-Rouayheb explains this approach by arguing that during this period, homosexual practices were mostly limited to pederastic relationships. Yet, it would be interesting to see future works that attempt to study possible same-sex relations between adult men or women in this historical context.

Adopting a constructivist approach, El-Rouayheb departs from the notion that the concept of “homosexuality” did not exist in pre-modern Arab societies, thus, rejecting previous existentialist arguments that see homosexuality as a timeless concept present in pre-modern cultures. The author argues that the complex and diverse vocabulary employed to refer to the participants of same-sex relations evidence a different reality compared to the modern one, as the emphasis was put on who took the active role in the intercourse. Furthermore, the age or social group of the participants were also relevant, complicating things more when scholars try to assess these relations. After defending his approach in the book’s introduction, Chapter 1 presents to the reader the series of terms that are employed to define and designate participants in homosexual relations. From the word *luti* to label the active partner to *ma’bun* or *mukhannath* to designate the passive partner, the term to designate the anal intercourse was *liwat*. El-Rouayheb argues that since the practice of sodomy between men involved the breaking of gender roles, most social anxieties towards homosexual practices were concerned about who took the passive role in the intercourse. This position carried many negative connotations such as defamation and the loss of honour, which could damage a man’s social position and reputation within his family or his relationship with the community. Moreover, if an adult man was penetrated by a younger male or by another man of minor social status, the embarrassment was significantly higher. As a result, El-Rouayheb argues that most homoerotic relations normally involved the participation of an adult man and a young beardless boy. Scholars have attempted to understand the nature and origins of these relationships, which have encouraged many to speculate about the possible effects that gender segregation might have had in Islamic societies, with the result of men practicing courtship and flattering

with boys rather than with women. El-Rouayheb does not completely discard this theory, seeing the resulting gender divide and the difficult access to women as a possible, but still remote, cause for these pederastic relations.

In Chapter 2, El-Rouayheb argues that despite men claiming their love for these young boys in literature, they still conceive it as a spiritual rather than a carnal love, with no real sexual desire. This devotion would respond to the same love that, according to the author, the ancient Greeks expressed for young boys, with the major difference that the Greeks did indeed practise sex with youths. This aesthete love would correspond with the love for the feminine traits of these boys, still not considered adults nor males, as their main facial and sexual features would not have been fully developed yet (pp.65-66). An interesting point developed by the author is his rejection of past arguments made by some scholars that branded this type of poetry as fictional or inventive. El-Rouayheb explains that this poetry, an expression of love and desire for young boys, was real and reflected a cultural reality, as it would have appealed to a public that shared this common attraction for youths (p.77). Nevertheless, it appears rather inconsistent that the very same society that by law interdicted same-sex intercourse, allowed pederastic love poetry to be delivered and consumed. For this, El-Rouayheb argues that what was not tolerated in Islamic societies was sodomy, whether it concerned an adult male and a youth or two adult males. Therefore, to express a chaste love or admiration for young boys by adult men in the form of poetry was permitted and, in fact, widely popular (p.79).

The last chapter of the book, Chapter 3, encompasses primarily the main legal approaches taken by the different Islamic Law Schools to same-sex male intercourse and their views on the writing of pederastic love poetry. For the Hanafi law school, anal intercourse, or *liwat*, was regarded as an external sin not related to the offence of fornication. However, for the Malaki law school, the act of sodomy was differentiated and received different punishments if it was practised by a man and a woman, considered a type of fornication sin, or by two men (pp.118-21). Another discussion El-Rouayheb develops in this chapter concerns whether sodomy would be permitted or forbidden in paradise. For some scholars, as the human anus had not been conceived for procreation, sodomy was considered a flaw, hence it would not be permitted in paradise. Yet, for other scholars, the practice of *liwat* would be perfectly feasible, since filth or reproduction were not present in paradise. By way of conclusion, the author summarises his core arguments by

rejecting the term “homosexuality” to be applicable in pre-modern Islamic societies, as he transfers the main debate to the focus and implications that the use of various terms and concepts suppose when assessing same-sex relations during this time. With this, an emphasis, rather on the gender, is put on the active or passive role taken by the participants, but also their age or social status. Accordingly, the main concern were adult males breaking pre-established gender norms by being sexually penetrated, and not the expression of same-sex love, what provoked most anxieties during this period. A patriarchal culture that considered a man’s honour as the most basic pillar within their community’s social framework, the practice of sodomy supposed the transgression of that honour, thus, threatening the very same social ties that bounded the members of that community. But the writing of pederastic poetry did not necessarily attack these values, as El-Rouayheb argues, this written admiration for the physical features of young boys was not condemned by Islamic law and was continuously expressed in many social ambits such as education or friendship. To understand why this homoerotic literature has been continuously suppressed and censored in modern Islamic societies, El-Rouayheb explains that the spread and adoption of Victorian values concerning sex, family and gender by the local Arab elites throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provoked the erosion of a tolerant literary culture that had previously characterised these societies. The results can still be attested today.

In conclusion, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab Islamic World* offers the reader a magnificent survey of sexual attitudes to pederastic relations and reflects the complexities of assessing same-sex relations in pre-modern societies. El-Roauyheb succeeds in bringing the reader an entertaining and well-researched monograph, rich in the use of translated primary sources that range from poetry to biographical literature and legal texts. A certainly recommended book to approach pederastic behaviour and courtship in the Ottoman East. Yet, the book can be problematic in certain aspects, as it offers a very limited account of sexual behaviour that is only ascribed to an urban elite, leaving behind the large mass of lower class and rural population. Added to this, the author does not cover any possible same-sex relations that might have occurred among adults, leaving this account a bit incomplete. Still, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in gender history and the history of sexuality as it offers the reader an original and well-studied account of sexual behaviour and attitudes in the pre-modern Arab world.