

## ***Sexuality in Islam***

Abdelwahab Bouhdiba. Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan.  
London: Saqi, 2004.

*Reviewed by Iman AL-Ghafari*

According to Abdelwahab Bouhdiba in his preface, the book is “an attempt to think through the relationship between the sexual and the sacred within the Arabo-Muslim societies” (vii), by offering the Islamic model as “a harmonious synthesis... of sexual ecstasy and religious faith”. (vii), and by putting ‘Islamic ethics’ at the core of the discussion. Hence, in the first part which is entitled “The Islamic View of Sexuality”, Bouhdiba stresses the relationship between Quran, Hadith and Fiqh, and tradition which is perceived as “a permanent element in the basis Arabo-Muslim personality” (2). This part presumes that the “Arabo-Muslim cultural system is centered on the need to identify, analyze and understand Tradition” (4). The return to “the sacred representation of sexuality” (5) is justified by Bouhdiba as an attempt to grasp the invariants within the Arabo-Muslim personality, by starting from “the will of God as revealed in the Sacred Book” (5) to show how this sacred representation was understood by the Arabo-Muslim communities.

In chapter one “The Quran and the Question of Sexuality”, Bouhdiba reflects upon the concept of duality as a “sign of divine miracle” (7), based on the notion of *zawj* which is discussed in accordance with the interpretation of *Lisan al-Arab*. Various ayat that are related to the creation of the humans in the mothers’ wombs and their creation of “a single soul” (8) are discussed to show the relation between physical love, spiritual love and social relations, and “the social meaning of sexuality, as apprehended in the Quran” (10). Hence, he refers to what he calls “the myth of the primal couple” (10). Adam and Eve are perceived as “the original dyad” (10) who brought about the concept of ‘aura’ that needs to be covered by clothing. In this part, the author relies on his own interpretation and translation of verse of Sura IV to suggest that “the primacy of man over woman is total and absolute” (11), and that is used to justify why the Islamic family is “male-worshipping” (11). By disregarding the opinions of “many commentators [who] would like to see this as a difference of nature” (11), Bouhdiba quickly puts an end to any further argument that may contradict his stated opinion which runs in favor of asserting that “the quranic view of sexuality is total and totalizing. The cosmic and the social, the psychological and the social rest on the union of the sexes.” (11–12). Ironically, this part which claims to be an attempt to show “the exceptional place accorded to sexuality in the Quran”

becomes a sort of contradictory interpretations of some selected surahas that do not seem to be related to sexuality in the modern sense of the word. After delving on 'Eros' and biology in Quran, Bouhidba eventually declares that "sexuality cannot be reduced to procreation" (12). Nevertheless, even after realizing that sex and procreation are different from sexuality, Bouhidba ends this part by an insistence to prove "the exceptional place accorded to sexuality in the Quran." (13).

Chapter two revolves around "Sexual Prohibitions in Islam" with a particular focus on women and sexual relations. Bouhidba interprets many terms, such as *ha-dath as related to bodily wastes*, *nikah* as marriage and *wat* as coitus, in an attempt to show how sexual practices are regulated within Islam. However, it is clear that Bouhidba was selective in interpreting and translating some Arabic words, such as 'muhsana'. In the Arabic-Arabic dictionary, *muhsana* stands for a "free, pure, and virtuous single female", who does not have to be necessarily married. However, Bouhidba defines *muhsana* as "the person who, by virtue of legal marriage (*nikah*) is exclusively reserved to his or her spouse" (15). This definition disregards another surah that advises the unmarried believers to propose to pure females who are referred to in the plural as '*muhsanat*'. In other verses in Quran, men are asked not to accuse free and single females of indecency, or target them by improper words or acts. Hence, the reliance on one example as representative of the concept of '*muhsana*' is not enough. Meanwhile, the author associates between "publicity in Islamic marriage" (15) and the feast (*walima*) and attributes it to a saying by the prophet, disregarding the various meanings of publicity that are not related to ceremonies. The chapter provides a sketchy overview of some prohibitions related to marriage in a confusing manner that makes it difficult for the reader to make a distinction between the religious views that stem from Quran, the interpretations of the author, and the social customs and traditions in 'Maghreb' (18).

In chapter three "The Eternal and the Islamic Feminine", Bouhidba returns to the statement with which he started his first chapter, which is the 'supremacy of the male in Islam'. However, in this chapter, he reflects upon what he perceives as "a feminist breath" (19) within the sacred text, while also asserting that women are presented as "stereotypes" (19). Again, the perspective of the author remains vague and somehow self-contradictory, for it seems hard to find 'the feminist breath' amongst these stereotypes. By making a comparison and contrast between the 'temptation of Joseph' as it appears in the Biblical text and in Quran, the author concludes after a detailed analysis of the story that the "Islamic tradition is marked by a very high degree of sensitive feelings; the archetype of the eternal feminine of which Putiphar's wife represents only one....emerges at every stage" (29). Thus, there is a sort of an intertextuality in which the woman who is not mentioned by name in the Quranic text is repeatedly referred to as "Zuleikha" or "Putiphar's wife" in Bouhidba's chapter which tries to show that there are "chosen women as there are chosen men" (29) in Quran. However, it is hard throughout the entire analysis to understand the stance of the author, or the point behind the comparison between the Islamic text and the Biblical text, or even to see in what 'feminist' way "Zuleikha" who is described by the author as "the archetype of the excessively amorous woman" (29) was chosen, other than her being a source of seduction to Joseph.

In chapter four, “The Frontiers of the Sexes”, Bouhdiba claims that the “Islamic view of the couple” is based on the “harmony of the sexes” that can be realized when the man assumes “his masculinity” and the woman achieves her “full femininity”. (30). Consequently, Bouhdiba comes to assert that “the divine curse embraces both the boyish woman and the effeminate man” (31), without using any Quranic verse that supports his argument which seems to be imposed to bring out the issue of “homosexuality”. Rather, the author returns to the story of ‘Lot’s incest’ in the Bible, and contrasts it to Lot’s story in Quran. The story is used to tell that “homosexuality is a challenge to the order of the world as laid down by God” (32), without thoroughly analyzing the Quranic text that discusses the reasons behind the condemnation of the people of Lut in particular. Meanwhile, the author returns to some unspecified hadiths, and books of ‘fiqh’ to show that “clothing” needs to assert “sexual dichotomy” (33), and that the “colors green, red and white are strongly advocated for men.” (33). Again, it is unclear who advocated these colors; God himself, men of religion, *Kitab al-aghani*, or even *The Thousand and One Nights* that is quoted to show “fetishism of hair in Islam” (35). Within the context of this chapter, it is hard to distinguish between the personal views and observations of the author and the misogynistic views that are criticized within Islam. By the end of the chapter, Bouhdiba returns to the ‘masculine woman’ who is treated as an example of “revolt against femininity” (40), without analyzing the meanings of masculinity or femininity in Islam and if they ever occurred as gendered concepts in the Quran.

Chapter five “Purity Lost, Purity Found”, Bouhdiba moves to analyze the concept of purity in Islam “tahara” which is seen as “a pleasure, an art, a practice- and sometimes an obsession” (44). Purification practices, such as ‘wudu’, and ‘gusul’ are compared and contrasted in relation to sexual intercourse and other aspects that relate to purifying the body. Accordingly, Bouhdiba directly states that “the Islamic doctrine of purity seems to me to be fundamentally anxiety-inducing.” (49). Other purification practices that pertain to orgasm, menstrual blood and childbirth are analyzed to reveal how the “sexual is used in service of the social” (57). This part is used to show that sexual practices in Islam can sometimes be purified by ritual purity. It also makes a connection between people’s obsession with cleanliness and “their frequent visits to the Moorish baths” (56) and the “Arabo-Muslim upbringing” (56).

Chapter six “Commerce with the Invisible” analyzes the Islamic theology which distinguishes between the visible humans and the invisible angels, ‘djinn’ and ‘devils’. In this part, myths and traditions are intertwined with some historical views that treat the sexual organ of the man as “a gift” from God, so the “non-sexed devil was jealous of human sexuality” (60). This part seems to associate human sexuality with man’s penis which is seen as a source of envy for some invisible creatures. The chapter’s description of the devil brings “some medieval Christian fantasy” (61), and how the prophet confronted the devil by virtue.

Chapter seven “The Infinite Orgasm”, Paradise is seen as a “place for sexual pleasures” (72). Bouhdiba delves into the description of Paradise and its natural beauty and the types of drinks that are offered there. Carnal pleasures are associated with the presence of *Hur al-ain* who are fantasized as “black-eyed houri” (75). According to Bouhdiba, they are “as feminine as can be imagined” (75). Hence, eroticization of paradise makes it the ultimate “object of desire” (86) that was able to “free

the Islamic consciousness" (87). However, it is difficult to understand, within the context of this chapter, how the heterosexual fantasy of paradise as an erotic place for excessively lustful men freed Muslim men, and to what extent it provided them with an "infinite orgasm".

In "The Sexual and the Sacral", Bouhdiba discusses the importance of sexual pleasures in Islam and asserts that "in Islam, sexuality enjoys a privileged status" (88). Here, by 'sexuality', Bouhdiba probably means heterosexuality within the institution of marriage. The chapter discusses what should a woman do to please her husband whenever and wherever he wants to have intercourse. Some hadiths are used to support this argument that revolves around marital duties. At this point, Bouhdiba compares the 'radical' attitude of Islam towards love with the Christian attitude which he perceives as 'hostile towards sexuality'. (93). In this chapter, Bouhdiba becomes preoccupied with what he describes as "Christian sexuality". (94). According to him, "Christianity reduces the sexual...Islam, while also wishing to transcend the sexual...has always refused to reduce it". (100). This chapter treats sexuality as "an act of faith" (98), and as a "personal, historical commitment" (99).

In the second part of the book which is entitled "Sexual Practice in Islam", Bouhdiba returns to the same issue that he raised at the beginning of the book, but this time, sexuality is associated with sociality. Though the book repeatedly asserts that "Islam accepts sexuality" (103), it does not seem to specify the type of sexuality. However, in the second part of the book, it becomes clear to the reader that by "sexuality", the author means heterosexuality. In this context, Bouhdiba hastily mentions that there are differences between what he terms as "black Islam", "Arab Islam", "Iranian Islam" and "Malaysian Islam", and he attributes these differences to 'folklore'. For him, such differences reveal "the flexibility" of Islam. (104). Even while treating Islam as multiple, Bouhdiba insists on treating the "Arabo-Muslim women" as a homogenous heterosexual entity that shares the same attitudes and behavior, disregarding the multiplicity of Arab cultures, folklores, and values not only among Arab countries, but also within the same country between the rural areas and the urban ones, and the many differences that exist among women on the basis of their class, education and sexual orientation. In this context, the Arab man is seen as essentially heterosexual who is "haunted by extra-matrimoniality" (115).

In chapter ten "Variations on Eroticism: misogyny, mysticism and '*mujun*'", Bouhdiba defends "the Islamic civilization [as] essentially feminist" (116). In this part, the author seems to be astonished at "the devaluation of femininity in Arabo-Muslim countries", especially when "Islam and hatred of women appear to be incompatible" (116). This runs contrary to the points discussed in the first part which seem to attribute the misogynistic behavior of Muslims to Islam that treats women as love objects both on earth and in paradise. In the second part, it becomes more difficult for me to understand the stance of the author regarding women, Islam, and Arab-Islamic cultures at large. The exaggerated assumption that "feminism is still widely regarded ... as an anti-quranic revolution" (116) does not give enough justice to the enormous efforts of many pro-quranic Arab and Islamic feminists who desperately use Quran and Islamic texts to get more rights to Muslim women. When it comes to "*mujun*", Bouhdiba brings back the stories that pertain to effeminate men and their presumed orgies with women and pretty boys in some old literary texts. (130).

In chapter 11, “Erotology”, Bouhdiba returns to the topic of Arab eroticism which is seen as advocated to by the prophet. “Muhammad himself set the example, when he encouraged his disciples...to attend the preliminaries of love-making, to sexual play and to fantasy” (140). This chapter discusses the standards of female beauty among Arabs before and after Islam. In this part, the author interprets female masculinity from a heterosexual perspective ‘as an attempt on the part of women to resemble boys, in order to attract the attention of men who are attracted to pretty boys’. (141–142). In this context, female masculinity is deprived of any lesbian connotation, for it is treated as constructed as an outcome of male homosexuality, not as an assertion of a sexual identity. Thus, Bouhdiba suggests that the homosexual element played a “role in the development both of pederasty and of lesbianism”(142). The author uses some historical texts to provide clues to ‘lesbianism’ and homosexuality in the past, without making any distinction between the two concepts; rather they are both seen as erotic acts. According to Bouhdiba, even al-hammam is “an eroticized place” (157). Such a generalized assumption neglects various socio-historical contexts in which hammams were used for socialization.

In chapter 12 “Certain Practices”, Bouhdiba argues that “Islam helped in the formation of a specific form of culture” (159). In an attempt to prove this point, he examines “significant aspects of everyday life: the hammam, circumcision, prostitution and obscene folklore” (160). In this part, ‘Muslim hammams’ are compared with the Roman ones in their organization and their cleansing rites and practices. Again, Bouhdiba insists on eroticizing the hammam by narrating the words of ‘uqbani’ who claims that “lesbianism was wide-spread in his day and which obviously blossomed in the atmosphere of ostentatious nudity that reigned in the women’s hammam” (167). The fetishistic and voyeuristic suggestion of the ‘uqbani’ gives an impression that it was convenient for lesbian lovers to have sex in hammam, even while they were surrounded by many heterosexual women and a male peeper. The use of such a discourse proves that the closeted places of women were the object of some men’s fantasies that tend to spy on the naked bodies of women and fantasize them as having sex in the public bath, even if they were merely bathing or socializing. Apparently, the hammam was sexually seductive to the erotic imagination of many writers throughout history and its eroticization acquired validity through the repetitions of some inherited fantasies that seemed appealing to the creation of the image of the seductive Orient. The chapter seems detached from the contemporary Arab cultures, for it does not reveal to what extent the hammam is part of the daily lives of women, especially when most women in the modern times have private bathes in their houses and they rarely if ever go to public hammams.

In chapter Thirteen, “The Kingdom of Mothers”, Bouhdiba reaches the conclusion that Muslim society is organized in terms of sexual division, and that “the passage from the Quran and the Sunna to the *fiqh* is a passage from the harmonious unity of the sexes to their duality” (213). Meanwhile, the chapter discusses the role of mothers and regards Muslim upbringing as “authoritarian” (220). In this context, Algeria is used as an example of “a castrating society” (222), and the words of the Tunisian president about his upbringing are used as a proof that women should be treated as ‘human beings’ (223) in what Bouhdiba repeatedly calls “Arabo-Muslim societies’.



The conclusion is not different from what came before, but it probably summarizes the message that the book is about "crisis of sexuality and the crisis of faith in the Arabo-Muslim world today" (231). In this context, Bouhdiba applies the "psycho-social approach" used by some Tunisian psychiatrists who conclude that "30% of Tunisian girls and young women suffer from hysteria" (237). Therefore Bouhdiba suggests that "the sexual liberation of woman requires the liberation of man" (239). However, he does not clarify how this type of sexual liberation can be achieved, or how to "produce new cultural, ethical and religious values" (245), especially when he also admits that there is "a crisis in faith" (245). Nevertheless, it becomes clear at the end of the book that Bouhdiba wants to show that "Islam posited unity of meaning" (249), and "it is precisely that meaning that we must rediscover." (249).

Despite the fact that the book includes lots of information and allusions to several historical, mythical, and religious issues, the concept of sexuality remains ambiguous, especially when the book appears to be mainly focused on some Islamic views and attitudes towards sexual relations and practices. Hence, it largely becomes a study of sexual practices, erotic fantasies, and sexual ethics in Islam. However, sexual orientations, gender identities, and gay and lesbian subjectivities remain un-theorized. The book alternates between the theological approach, the historical one, the sociological one, the anthropological one, and the psychological one, without reflecting upon the modern concepts of gender and sexuality and how the author sees all of them apart from the historical views regarding sex. In my opinion, the book contains several generalizations about the so-called 'Arabo-Muslim world'. The study focuses to a large extent on Magreb, Algeria and Tunisia that appear to be seen as representatives of the Arab-Islamic countries. Some of the comparisons between Islam and Christianity appear to be imposed and not properly justified, especially when the book is supposed to revolve around sexuality in Islam and not about sexuality in Christianity. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the book uses many informative sources, even when some of them are more historical than Islamic, such as *The Thousand and One Nights*. The issue is that there is no enough analysis if such traditional and historical books had any effect on Muslim people's understanding of Islam, sex and sexuality, or if literary texts had ever been taken seriously by people in the contemporary Arab-Islamic countries. Clearly, the constant oscillation between the past and the present makes it relatively difficult to tell if the writer is referring to a fantasized past or to present-day realities. Suffice it to say that this book raises many questions, but it leaves most of them unanswered.