

Queer politics, Palestine and Palestinian lesbian activism in Israel

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Introduction

Back in 2006 when I was proofing my monograph *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* I discovered the existence of Aswat, a Palestinian lesbian organisation. This was through reading an article on the internet about Rauda Morcos, the first director of Aswat. Morcos, who is a Palestinian lesbian activist, was outed by an Israeli newspaper after an interview with her regarding her activism against Israeli oppression and occupation. When I met Morcos on January 31st, 2008, she was able to tell me how coming out was not a choice she had made and the consequences of the article that outed her in the headline (and which included a large photograph of her) were at first dire. As a result of being outed as a lesbian, Morcos was repeatedly harassed, physically assaulted, and had her car vandalised so many times that her local panel beater in Kufur Yassif stopped charging her for fixing it. Morcos also lost her livelihood and position as an educator due to her refusal to deny her sexual orientation once it became public. Around the same time as this was happening to Morcos, two Palestinian lesbians decided to create an email list for Arab-Israeli lesbians. In its humble beginnings, Aswat had eight members who met for the first time in 2002 and due to their common plight and sense of urgency, this first meeting lasted for eight hours. In 2003 Aswat was officially formed as a splinter group within the Palestinian feminist organization Kayan, and Aswat's membership began to increase exponentially. Soon, Aswat had their own website and women from all over the Arab world were subscribing to the forums and getting in contact with the group about Aswat's planned activities. It seemed, as Morcos stated in a radio interview on al-Shams radio in Nazareth during my visit, that Aswat was "born out of need."

Aswat is a unique Arab-lesbian organisation in that it is at once in the Middle East and also in a somewhat European country where Palestinians' lives often mirror the lives of other diasporic Arab communities in the West. As Nadiia, a sociologist by training, stated, "We live both within an "Arab" country when we are in our homes and then we immigrate to Israel, the European country, everyday. Everyday we enact this migration, like refugees in our own land, this is what it feels like to live with Israeli occupation and the apartheid mentality that predominates." Although Aswat appeared at a moment in history that also saw the founding of other indigenous LGBTIQ groups like Meem and Helem in Lebanon, it has been recognised by the receipt of international LGBTIQ awards like The Go Visible Award (Austria) and the Felipa De Souza Award (given to Morcos by IGLHRC) precisely because of the privilege of visibility that the organisation can have in a country that does not prosecute (or persecute) gays and lesbians. Unlike Meem and Helem in Lebanon for example, and the organisations that address LGBTIQ issues in indirect (i.e. clandestine) ways in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, Aswat as an organisation is not forced to go underground. As a result, Aswat's outreach activities, their publications and community engagement are all visible on their website, along with freely available details of where and when regular support meetings are held.iii This does not mean that its combination of volunteers and two part-time paid workers are in themselves visible. On the contrary, Morcos, who is now the former general coordinator of the group, along with Samira Saraya, the current coordinator, remain the only self-declared

representatives of the group.

While Aswat is in many ways in a better position than similar organisations in the Arab world, it would be utterly naïve to sing the praises of the Israeli state as somehow assisting a secular, human rights Palestinian group like Aswat as many in the international LGBTIQ like to imagine. For, it is precisely due to Israeli military and economic policies that the Arab communities inside Israel and the occupied territories have become so resistant to homosexuality. Without access to proper and continuous education, and to facilities like research institutions, without the infrastructure needed for a progressive Palestinian state, the Israeli state is directly responsible for the degeneration and destruction of a pan-Arab, socialist-democratic movement best known for its decades of *infatih* (openness) throughout the fifties and sixties, which began to decline after the 1967 defeat and which were eventually replaced by Militant Islamism as a viable (and unfortunate) option for resisting occupation and oppression.^{iv} It is difficult to manoeuvre between the rage that haunts one as a human being attuned to the daily humiliations of innocent people at the hands of a military state like Israel, and the rage that haunts one as a homosexual human being attuned to the daily humiliations of equally innocent people oppressed by patriarchy and false piety as tends to be the case in the occupied territories and the Arab-quarters of Israel. That is not to say that the uncomplicated binary of Arab world equals backwards, while the “Western” world equals “liberalism” and individual freedom is not problematic or even false, for despite the difficulties, we cannot forget many instances of compassion that go by unremarked. Like Morcos’s compassionate panel beater, or her loving and supportive family for example. The Arab world is not without its fair share of genuine attempts at achieving sexual rights for women and gender minorities, as well as seeking to protect individual rights more generally.^v Not to mention that homophobia in its current configuration is born out of a combination of modernity and militarism, whereas the classical Arab world was much more at ease with the body and a variety of sexual desires.

P.S.

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