



Research Paper

## Sex in the Arabic Language, Literature and Culture

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### ABSTRACT

Arabs of the pre-Islamic times were very interested in sex. Having sex was something common to do. Likewise, in the days of Bani Umayyad, the interest of the caliphs and leaders in the female servants was not only because of the wishes of the caliphs and the leaders, but also because of the desire of female servants to have intimate relations, and such that for the people of Bani Umayyad, sex had become a common part of the culture. At the time of the Abbasids, the caliphs and leaders were very concerned about entertainment. Many entertainment houses were established. They bought female servants and placed them in special homes. There are many Arabic books about sex, mostly related to medicine, not pornography, clearly written in strong styles and interesting language, containing realistic sexual cases, and classified into medical categories for medical purposes, health or social, which most of them are descriptive. Sexual vocabulary in Arabic is very numerous, because a meaning -which in other languages is only marked with one word or two words- can be marked in Arabic by several words. Thus, article discusses sex in the perspective of Arabic culture, literature, as well as language.

**KEYWORDS:** sex, Arabic, culture, language, literature

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Arabs of the pre-Islamic times were very interested in sex. Having sex was something common for the people. In fact, where they worshipped idols, the female priestesses had sex they considered to be sacred with visitors or people who were worshipping to get pleasure from idols. The women in Mecca opened their doors to be used as a place of prostitution openly, by showing certain signs to travellers that they were prostitutes.

Among the women who became prostitutes mentioned in the history books were Nabighah Sulmabinti Harmalah, mother of Amr ibn Ash, who had sex in a day with Abu Lahab bin Abdul Muttalib, Umayyah bin Khalf, Hisham bin al-Mughirah, Abu Sufyan bin Harb and al-Ash bin Wa'il. Other than her was Marjanan binti Nuf, the mother of Ibad bin Ziyadah and Ubaidullah bin Ziyad. Another person was Az-Zurqabinti Wahab, the wife of Abu Ash bin Umayyah and the grandmother of Marwan bin al-Hakim. Then, Hamamah, the mother of Abu Sufyan bin Harb. Sumiyah bint Mu'athal, mother of Ziyad bin Abihi; Qathambinti Shahwah at-Tamimiyah, friend of Abdullah bin Muljim; Nadhalah bint `Asma al-Kalbiyah, the wife of Rabi'ah bin AbdSyams and the mother of Uqbah bin Rabi'ah and Syaybah bin Rabi'ah. (an-Najjar, 2006: 189)

Likewise, in the days of Bani Umayyad, the interest of the caliphs and leaders in the female servants was not only because of the wishes of the caliphs and the leaders, but also because of the desire of female servants to have intimate relations, so that the people of Bani Umayyad, sex had become a common part of the culture. Women in the city learned about various kinds of art having sex. Some stories from Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani tell about women who liked to have intimate relationships for a long time and did not want to connect with people who did not give pleasure to them.

It was also told that, because Yazid bin Abdul Malik indulged in 'making love', the affairs of his country became neglected. In fact, when he was busy with women he often left the Friday prayers. Likewise, Al-Walid bin Abdul Malik, during his 9-year caliphate, had married 63 women. Al-Jahiz mentions that Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan once brought a female servant, then took off her clothes in front of his friends. Many poems in the Umayyad era also revealed vulgar sexual life at that time. For example, Farazdaq's poem, he described his female servant, al-Zanjiah, that "her female genitalia was open wide, making him more aroused."

At the time of the Abbasids, the caliphs and leaders were very concerned about entertainment. Many entertainment houses were established. They bought female servants and placed them in special homes. Prostitution increased and was carried out openly. Likewise, Jewish drinking places were used as a place for sex parties. No exception, places of worship for Christians were inseparable from sexual life. All cities in Arabia were full of such parties.

The Abbasid caliphs played a large role and supported entertainment involving women. Many old books contain stories about it. One famous story is the story of ar-Rasyid who entertained himself with three of his female servants, namely Sahr, Dhiya` and Khantsa. Ar-Rasyid married a female servant, Marajil and had a child named Al-Ma'mun, then married Zabidah and had a child named Al-Amin, and married Maridah and had children Al-Mu'tashim.

Meanwhile, Al-Ma'mun has 200 female servants. Likewise al-Amin liked women, especially the servants. His mother, Zubaydah, tried to stop his desires, namely by bringing in slave girls who then she made female servants. Then, the female servants were gathered with male servants, so that they would have fun, so that when the palace became more crowded.

The same goes for al-Mu'tashim who preferred female servants from Turkey. It was reported that al-Mutawakkil had four thousand servants of mistresses whom he married all (an-Najjar, 2006: 189).

## II. BOOKS ABOUT SEX IN ARABIA

It is worth mentioning that Arabs were the people who first compiled books about sexology. It is possible that Europeans did the same after them. The people of the city in Basrah of the year 135 were the pioneers of book writing in the field of sexology, including the books *Al-Nawaakih*, *Man Jami'a 'Aksaru min 'Arba'i Zawjaat*, *Man karahat Munaakahatuhu*, and *Man Tusyabbihu min an-Nisaa`*.

Arabic books about sex are numerous, mostly related to medicine rather than pornography, clearly written in strong style and interesting language. They contain realistic sexual cases and are classified into medical categories for medicinal purposes, health or social, and most of them are descriptive.

One example of this was Jalaludin Abdurrahman al-Suyuthi who wrote several books about sex, among them are *al-Wasyahfii Fawaa'id an-Nikaah*, *Syaqaa'iq al-Atranjfi Daqaa'iq al-Ghanj*, *Al-Wasyahfii Fawaa'id an-Nikaah*, dan *Al-Yuwaqitats-Tsamiinahfii Shifaat as-Samiinah*. It should be noted that Suyuthi wrote many books about sex, even though he was a scientist who wrote many religious books.

Aside from As-Suyuthi, Syaikh Abdurrahman bin Nashr-Syayzari, died around 589 AH, also wrote a book about sex entitled *Al-'Idhahfii 'Asraar an-Nikaah* which talks about food and supplementary drugs that could be used to increase the drive during intercourse, to lengthen and harden the male genitalia, as well as addresses everything related to impotence, various models of intercourse, certain sex drugs that may be used and prohibited and related to impotence.

In addition to that, Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Bajaa'I also wrote his book in literary style with the title *Tuhfat al-'Uruuswa Nazahat an-Nufuus*. Another of his book titled *Rujuu' asy-Syaikh 'ilaashabaahufii al-quwwati 'alaa al-bahwas* translated by Ahmad bin Sulaiman known as Ibn Kamal Pasha (died 940), at the request of Sultan Salim I. Ibn Kamal Pasha mentioned that there were many books about sex.

He said that he had collected it with the intention not to seek pleasure, but to restrain lust and maintain security during intercourse. The book is divided into two. The first consists of 30 chapters which contain sex in men and the second part contains 30 chapters which contain sex in women. The book was first published in Cairo, by al-Mathba 'al-'Amiiriyah in Bulaq in 1309 H. The book was one of the most famous books about sex in Arabia. (Zayd, 2008)

Furthermore, there are also books written by Shaikh Abu al-Abbas Ahmad bin Muhammad bi Ali al-Yamani, who was known as Ibn Qulaytah (died 231 H), whose one of his books was *Rusyd al-Labiib 'ilaa Mu'aasyarah* Abdullah Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Nafzawi. Also, there was *al-Habiib* in his book *Ar-Rawdhal-'Aathirfii Nazhat al-Khaathir*. The book was printed by the author's grandson without mentioning the year and place of publication. In its period this book had been translated into French and English and was widely known. (*Asyharu Kutub al-Jinsi al-'Arabiya* dalam [www.himaparadise.jeeran.com](http://www.himaparadise.jeeran.com), 25 Februari 2012)

On the other hand, one of the books of the current period about sex is *Hadaa'iq al-Jins* written by Muhammad al-Baz. It addresses how sex was positioned among people in the history, fatwas about sex, books about sex written by Islamic scholars and scientists, the role of sex in society and the attitude of Islam towards it. Another book is *al-Fiyagra wa al-Mansyathat al-Jinsiyah*, written by Mahir Yasri. This book contains powerful modern sex drugs for men, which is Viagra. This book is not placed in official libraries, but the book of *al-Jinsi al-Arabiya*, even though it is placed in a special place so that it is not visible to the eyes of supervisors.

In addition, there is a novel called *Burhan al-Asal*. This book was exhibited in Damascus in 2008. According to its author, Salwa an-Nu'aymi, the book was not withdrawn because there was an additional word "for tourists" in the novel. Likewise, *Burhan al-Asal* was included in the book exhibition in Abu Dhabi without

any problems. In Beirut and a number of exhibitions in Lebanon, the book was recorded as the highest-selling book, but authorities in Lebanon requested that the book should be labelled with "only for adults" on the cover. (Zayd, 2008)

Saladin al-Munjjid in his book *al-Hayat al-Jinsiyah 'an al-Arab* argues that the emergence of essays about sex in the Arab world and Islam refers to the beginning of the third century Hijiri, but unfortunately, there is no evidence to date. IbnNadim on the index of his book at the end of the tenth century included the titles of hundreds of studies, however all had been lost. Some are still in the form of manuscripts, both stored in special libraries in the West and East (As-Suwayd, 2009).

### III. SEXUAL VOCABULARY IN ARABIC

Sexual vocabulary in Arabic is very numerous, because a meaning - which in other languages is only marked with one word or two words - can be marked in Arabic by several words. For example, the word 'mating' in Arabic is further divided into several types in more detail, therefore the words that mark the same meaning are more than one. The mating of a man with a female friend who elope or live together secretly without marriage is called *nikaah al-hudn*. In addition, there is another phrase called *nikaah al-'istibdhah*, in which a man sends his partner to another man, who is famous for his virility, to have an affair and to be impregnated. This is so that the child born can grow to be a person who is respectable and become the pride of the parents.

Moreover, there is also another phrase called *nikaah al-badal*, namely two men agreed to exchange their partners and live together. There is no prohibition in society to do marriage like this. Another phrase called *zawaaj al-maqtis* the term for men who have an affair with their father's partners. It was reported that there were three people from BaniQays bin Tsa'lab who took turns with their father's partners. The source also mentioned that some of them were married to their daughters, including Hajin bin Zararah, a leader from BaniTamim marrying his daughter until she gave birth to a child. (Shafr, 2007: 182)

Arab people's interest in sex can be identified from their language which contains a lot of vocabulary about sex, ranging from female genitalia to the process of intercourse. Likewise, the example above, the word 'mating', is very large in number, not only because of its many types, but also due to the different terms. According to Tsa'labiin his book *Fiqh al-Lughah*, the word 'to mate' for humans is *nakaha*, while *kaama* is for horses, *baaka* for donkeys, *qaa'a* for camels, *'aazhal* for dogs, *safada* for birds, *naza* for goats, and *qamatha* for chickens. In the book *Lisaan al-'Arab*, there are many words for 'to mate with a woman', such as *asbadha'a*, *dzakhama*, *khaja'a*, *watha'a*, *naaka*, *nakaha*. (an-Najjar, 2006:189)

In September 2002, Riad el-Rayyes Book, Beirut, Lebanon published a 361-page book, with the title *Al-Qaamus al-Jinsiy 'Inda al-'Arab (The Sexual Dictionary of Arabs)*, compiled by Ali Abdul Halim Hamzah. In the introduction of the dictionary, he said that the publication of the dictionary was because he liked to read the book *Lisaan al-'Arab* by IbnManzhuur. He read the book over and over again, and every time he read, he collected words related to sex, so that the number reached a lot and he made it as a theme in his doctoral dissertation in Lebanon, with the title "Lughat al-Jinsifi at -Turrats, Lisaan al-'Arab Namuudzajan". Thereafter, based on his research, he took the initiative to make a dictionary that contained specifically about sex vocabulary because in Arabic there was no such dictionary. In addition to many vocabulary related to this, the theme is also very closely related to human life. According to him, knowing the vocabulary about sex is not something that is prohibited and embarrassing because there is no shame in the field of language.

While reading *Lisaan al-'Arab* by IbnManzhuur and *Taaj al-'Uruus* by Zubaydi, he found a lot of vocabulary about sex which then he collected into a special dictionary. According to him, there are several things that cause a lot of sexual vocabulary in Arabic. First, there are a lot of tribes in Arabia, and each tribe has a special term for it such that when combined, the number becomes a lot. Secondly, sex life among Arabs was important, so that in every age, many new sexual words emerged, both from the Arabic vocabulary itself as well as from other nations, such as Persia, Roman, Indian or Turkish. Third, besides their use in denotative and essential forms, this vocabulary was also used in connotative or *majazi* forms. Fourth, besides containing things related to the genitalia, the dictionary also relates sex with other things such as human, place, time, society and civilisation. (Hamzah, 2002: 9)

The Arabic sexual dictionary is divided into three chapters. The first chapter contains things related to men. The second chapter contains matters relating to women and the third contains things related to men and women. The first chapter is divided into several sub-chapters. First, about things related to male traits, second about things related to sperm and the third about things related to male genitalia. (Hamzah, 2002: 9)

The second chapter is further divided into several sub-chapters. First, about matters relating to the characteristics of women, second about matters relating to the female internal sex organs, third about matters relating to the female external sex organs, fourth about matters relating to female genitalia, fifth about things related to bosoms, thighs, buttocks, and the sixth about things related to a woman's attraction, such as smile,

movements, saliva, youth, lips, gums, voice, speech, chastity, politeness, variety, colours and gaze. (Hamzah, 2002: 9)

The third chapter is further divided into several sub-chapters. First about the introduction of intercourse, second about the process of intercourse and its consequence, third about the names or terms of marriage, fourth about sexual desire, fifth about the description of eroticism, sexual deviation, impotence, sexual harassment or crimes and the sixth about the buttocks. (Hamzah, 2002: 9)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

One reason why there are so many Arabic books about sex is because sex is part of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Many Islamic scientists and scholars have written books about it. Every *fiqh* expert has one or more essays about it. For example, As-Suyuthi has three books about sex. This is because he believes that there must be a law regulating this matter. This means that the authors made these books for the purpose of Islamic jurisprudence, so that the society can find their happiness in their marriage. Hence, everything is for social purposes, and not merely to arouse personal desire. (Bakkar, 2004).

There are many books about sex in the Arabian history. Generally, the books discuss about medicine and literature, with the aim of giving solutions to impotence from the perspective of medicine, not from the aspect of pornography. This applies to both books that have been printed and those that are still in the form of scripts. (Asyharu Kutub al-Jinsi al-'Arabiyah dalam [www.himaparadise.jeeran.com](http://www.himaparadise.jeeran.com), 25 Februari 2011)

However, when compared with libraries in the Netherlands, the numbers are truly embarrassing. Except for pornographic books, the Netherlands exports thousands of books on sexology in the fields of medicine, academics and research to various countries in the world. In fact, the Netherlands is a small country, but the country can print and export books much more than that in Arab countries.

Simon Faldar, one of the distributors of books on sex said that he had exported books to Europe, America and a little to Southeast Asia, but he did not export them to Arab countries, because these countries did not want to accept them. He tried to market the books through the book exhibitions he participated in. Meanwhile, Jamil Hilmi, the owner of the publisher of Arabic books in the Netherlands, said that Arabs had translated many important books and published them quickly. After that, they sold it in Arabic libraries without being equipped with publishing rights. Among these books are novels and books about sex. There are thousands of novels reprinted thousands of times in Arab countries in illegal ways. (Zayd, 2008)

The author of the book *al-Jins al-Famawiy* (Oral Sex) published by Markazar-Raayah lil Tanmiyah al-Fikriyah, in 2007, in Jeddah, argued that the purpose of the book was to provide people with more insight on sex, not for other purposes. He explained that what prompted him to compile the book was that Islam was not a religion that is frozen and empty of romance and sentimentality. He added that many men and women wanted to know about the law of oral sex, and if there were men and women who did oral sex, one of them was because they did not know about the law. He added that he supported the establishment of an organization that deals with sexual behaviour in general, including oral sex, to provide insight to people in Islamic countries who have no knowledge of sex. (Zayd, 2008)

Meanwhile, Adnan Abu Zayd from Amsterdam said that libraries in Arabia lack scientific books about sex, while pornographic sex books are banned a lot, even though they are placed behind and on hidden shelves, as do street vendors who offer books about magic on street sidewalks who take advantage of their commercial aspects rather than from their artistic and intellectual values. On one hand, there is a wave of tyranny of fundamentalists towards intellectual and social activities, such that many books or novels related to problems sex or mention sex in it are prohibited or confiscated. On the other hand, books, magazines and novels about sex develop on the black market in secret.

One example of this is in Iraq during the reign of Saddam Hussein. The "Faith Campaign" held at that time destroyed books about sex, even though among them there were scientific books, from a list of school libraries and institutions in Iraq. The novel Najib Mahfuzh and the work of Nizaar Qabbani were censored, and were wiped out when Baghdad fell in 2003. On the contrary in the black market, books about sex, both pornographic and scientific, have continued to develop because books on scientific sex were in libraries in Arabia, some of which are bought not only for the purpose of seeing a world that is forbidden by religion and social, but also used as a way to fulfil sexual desire for readers. (Zayd, 2008)

Abdul Aziz bin as-Suwayd, advisor at the Social Islamic Foundation, stressed that there is a need to teach *Shari'a* sex education in schools, which contains the right education curriculum made by professional teachers who could fortify students and children, especially when facing interference or seeing inappropriate information on the internet. He invites to establish a special institution consisting of religion, mind and social studies scientists to set up a list vocabulary about sex problems in the form of appropriate expressions and terms, and prohibit using inappropriate vocabulary.

He explained that the Islamic jurisprudence teaches about sex in a subtle way. Therefore, he discouraged the use of the term 'sex education' in schools, but 'family education' which contains the discussion of gender issues and their functions, sexual relations between husband and wife, conditions that must be met in marriage, about children's rights, and others, all of which are packaged in the form of Islamic education. If we examine the *fiqh* books that are applied in Islamic schools, we will find vocabulary *an-nikaah*, *al-watha'*, *al-wuquu' dan al-jima'*, namely the terms used in sex and an explanation of genitalia in detail. Also, when we look at the dictionary of sexual terms in Arabic, we will see that the Arabs have a large vocabulary in this culture.

According to him, our society is very sensitive to sexual vocabulary because the people are not used to it, although many talk about it secretly in special places. The absence of Islamic legal vocabulary used daily in the media has led to their lack of confidence in the inherited words from the vocabulary that defines sexual relations according to the *Shari'a*. (Baridah, 2009).

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