

تاريخنا
عنه
من يوم

Our Colorful History

Stories on sexual and gender diversity
in the Arab and Islamic world

مُسْلِم



Introduction

Here, we would like to gather examples of sexual and gender diversity present in the Arab and Islamic history that is celebrated by many Muslims, in which many forms of sexual and gender diversity were expressed. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, rather these short and varied stories are proof that we've always existed, under different concepts and labels.

This publication is part of the project (Islam and Queer issues) in the framework of the partnership between Meem Muslim initiative and Bedayaa organization.

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Stories

- 4 Badhl, The singer
- 5 A Lesbian from Upper Egypt
- 6 Al-Amin
- 7 Al-Ghulamiyyat
- 8 Abu Nuwas
- 9 Ibn Sahl al-Andalusi
- 10 Al-Mukhannathun

Badhl, The singer



(I see nothing tastier than lesbianism)

She lived in the Abbasid era, during the reign of Caliph *al-Ma'mun*. She was one of the most important singers of this era, who contributed to a true historizing of the Arabic singing, where she collected more than twelve thousand musical lyrics in her book. In addition, she memorized hundreds of thousands of musical lyrics.

She was educated under the mentorship of senior pundits in several art schools, such as *Abu al-Qasim ibn Jami'* and *Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi*, which helped her greatly and made her a capable artist with experience and great knowledge of music and singing arts. What supported her the most was her wonderful memory, which qualified her to be an important reference for musical lyrics.

Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani says in his famous book *al-Aghani*: "*Badhl* was yellow. She was born in Medina and raised in Basra. She was one of the advanced philanthropists, known for narrating a lot, it's said that she could sing thirty thousand musical lyrics".

And because of her prestige and knowledge, there were a lot of admirers who proposed to her and worked to appease her in all ways. But she was known for her unequivocal refusal to marry men.

Al-Isfahani says she was "*Zarifa*".

In some Arab countries, the term "*Zarifa*" was used to refer to lesbian women. *At-Tifashi* also says: "If it was said that a woman is "*Zarifa*", it means that she was known to them as a lesbian".

Al-Isfahani mentioned an incident that took place in a drinking council of the Caliph *al-Ma'mun*, where she sang a verse that said:

"I see nothing tastier than a promise"

She changed it, saying:

"I see nothing tastier than lesbianism"

A Lesbian from Upper Egypt

Do not mess with Egyptian lesbians!

In *Tifashi's* book *Nuzhat al-Albab*, he tells the story of an Egyptian judge whom he met while he was in Egypt during the Abbasid period. It happened that one night the judge went to *Qarafa* (the graves) in Upper Egypt and determined to stay over there. There were dwellings where women met every week.

As he walked between the tombs, riding his mule, he heard a sound coming from a place on the edges of *Qarafa*. The voice was a female moaning and inhaling. The voice surprised the judge and pushed him to find out where it comes from. He saw a beautiful Turkish woman, and on the top of her lies an Egyptian woman. They were having sex and exchanging flirting words.

When the judge wanted to expose them, the Egyptian woman came to him and offered him the beautiful Turkish woman in exchange for his silence and to leave them alone. And because the judge was already taken by the beauty of the Turkish woman, he agreed. When he left his mule and whip in the possession of the Egyptian woman and approached the Turkish woman, raising his clothes and stripping his pants. He heard the screaming of the other woman telling him that his mule had escaped, and he started running behind it, floundering in that semi naked form, while hearing the laughter of the two women behind him. The woman had beaten his mule with a whip to run away and people laughed at him.

Today's wisdom: Do not mess with Egyptian lesbians!



Al-Amin

The gay Caliph

The Abbasid Caliph *Muhammad al-Amin*, the son of *Harun ar-Rashid*, had refrained from cohabiting with women, and made for himself a number of young men to spend his time with them.

One of these young men was named *Kawthar*. He was loved and desired by *Al-Amin*. He wrote poetry that describes his passion for him, and even the poets, if they wanted to approach the Caliph, would write poems to praise *Kawthar*.

Some of the verses that was written by *Al-Amin* to *Kawthar* say:
What would people want from a miserable lover,
Kawthar is my religion, my life, my sickness and my medicine,
The most helpless is the one who discourages a lover from the one he loves.

His mother, *Zubaydah bint Ja'far*, tried to endorse him into women by making the palace's maidens wear male uniforms, but her attempts failed.



Al-Ghulamiyyat

Transmen in the Abbasid period

In an attempt to make her son wish for women, the mother of the caliph *al-Amin*, who was gay, ordered all the maidens to wear men clothes such as the army-men clothes. They were commonly known as “*al-Ghulamiyyat*” (The Boyish Girls/ The Maid-mens)

This was so common that the presence of *al-Ghulamiyyat* was a widespread phenomenon, and although it did not help in reducing the appearance of homosexuality among men in the Abbasid society, it helped many transmen and queer people generally to express themselves more freely. Not only was it about clothes, but females were also able to have different hairstyles like that of boys and a mustache line of musk and aromas. Some even had male names like *al-Qasim* and *Ja'far*.

Abu Nuwas says in a poem:

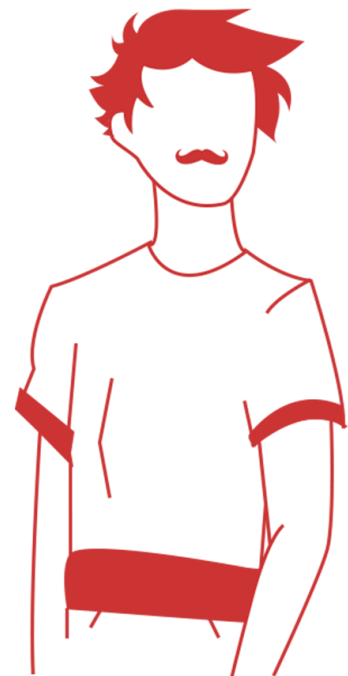
Women with black eyes respectfully appeared in male clothes
With short curly hair and and mustaches made from Aromas

They showed obvious masculine traits, played games of men at that time, practiced their crafts and used their weapons, that people wouldn't differentiate between them and biological males.

Abu Nuwas also says:

A feminine masculine woman with beautiful eyes,
If you saw her, you'd think she's a man

Although it was an attempt to change the sexual orientation of the gay caliph, it only succeeded in helping transgender men to be visible more freely in that era.



Abu Nuwas

He wrote one of the most famous Islamic litanies, a litany called (Your forgiveness is the greatest), which was sung by so many famous sunni and shia islamic religious vocalists. And it continues to be played on many islamic channels today.

Abu Nuwas was one of the most prominent poets of the Abbasid period, if not the most prominent. Perhaps his character was the most complex to those who came after him, and even those of his time. *Abu Nuwas* was a poet who never concerned himself with matters unrelated to him.

He did not give weight to people nor their opinions about him, on the contrary, he frankly disdained their hypocrisy with his actions.

He was fond of wine and wrote poems in praise of it, when the majority of people drank it secretly:

"Pour me wine and tell me: This is wine
Don't pour it for me secretly if it is possible to pour it openly"

He flirted with bearded men, when flirting with smooth-faced young men became common (whose beards did not grow):

"The gossipers said: His beard has shown on his cheek
I said, "Do not be excessive, it is not a fault
His beauty is the same as I always found him to be
And this poem is to defend him from those who criticize him"

He also has frankly and openly flirted with male servants and *al-Ghulamyyat* (the maid-mens) as well as gender-conforming women.

Abu Nuwas is an example of honesty, clarity and peace with oneself, and a stark example of sexual variance, or as we call it today "pansexuality".



Ibn Sahl al-Andalusi

The poet of Seville

Openness to homosexual relations has spread throughout the Islamic State. And one of the most famous poets of Andalusia is *Ibrahim ibn Sahl al-Ishbili*, known as the poet of Seville. He is an Andalusian poet, that was born in the city of Seville to a Jewish family. He converted to Islam in a young age and wrote poems to praise prophet Muhammad and was known for the art of *Muwashshahat*, that he was one of the most prominent poets to write Andalusian *Muwashshahat*, as well as writing *Ghazal*. And many poems that he wrote are still popular today, like:

“The heart of the broken one is filled with imagining you
And the sleep without you is not sweet anymore,
I am the one ,with all the love and desire,
That loves you, my Moon, openly and proudly.”

Al-Ishbili was in love with a man named *Musa* and mentioned him in many poems.

“The freckles on *Musa*’s cheek are like
dark admonishments in the light of love
and the dimple on his cheek is a beautiful spiral
like distant splatters of ink”

Some tried to consider that *al-Ishbili* was talking about the prophet Moses, not a male lover. *Athir ad-Din Abu Hayyan*, who wrote *al-Bahr al-Muhit*, proved that to be wrong using obviously flirting verses from the poems of *al-Ishbili*.

“I keep listening to the stories of prophet Moses,
Seeking your mention and willing to find it”

And in another poem:

“The prophet Moses had rescinded magic in the past,
And now, *Musa* has come with his magic”



Al-Mukhannathun

(We became real women)



Nowadays, the word “*Mukhannath*” is considered to be an offensive word, but the Arabs have always used it in the past, with no offense, to describe a person assigned male at birth, who has feminine characteristics, which is the closest thing to transgender women nowadays. This term can also include gay men who have feminine attitudes. The visibility of *Mukhannath* people was clear in nearly most of the Islamic ages and in different countries. They have been distinguished by shaving their beards and by their feminine speech and many of them had female names like *Dalal* and *Tarifa*.

In the first century AH, Caliph *Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik* wrote a letter to the alderman of Medina, *Abu Bakr ibn Amr ibn Hazm*, asking him to count *Mukhannath* people. An ink drop fell from the writer’s pen on the paper, changing the word “count” أحص to be “Castrate” أخص *Mukhannath* people. And when the letter came to the alderman of Medina and was read by his clerk, the alderman told him that it may be meant "count" *Mukhannath* people. The clerk said: Dear alderman, there is a very clear dot on the litter *kha'*. The alderman ordered to bring *Mukhannath* people to be castrated. Most of them ran away, but few of them had been castrated. The number of *Mukhannath* people who were castrated varies from historical book to book. Some say two, some say four, some say six and some say nine. The castration was compulsory and is considered violence. But what is interesting is their reactions to it. *Abu al-Fadl al-Maydani* narrated that *Tuways* said after being castrated: That was just another circumcision. *Dalal* said: It's the greatest circumcision. *Nasim as-Sahar* said: Being castrated, I'm now a real *Mukhannath*. *Nawmat ad-Doha* said: We became real women. *Bard al-Fu'ad* said: We are now free from holding the urine pipe. *Zill ash-Shagar* said: Why would we need a weapon that we never use?

Hamza al-Isfahani narrated that *Tuways* said: You did nothing. By castration, we became fully *Mukhannath*. And *al-Bladheri* narrated that *Dalal* said: Being fully *Mukhannath* is now achieved.

Al-Jahiz narrated from the old people of Medina saying: (They said: We are now real women. As if, if they had the choice, they would have chosen to be women). And they said about the effect of castration: (They took the two characteristics out of castration and being *Mukhannath*, soft voice and smooth joints movement and great femininity, never reached by *Mukhannath* women nor feminine men), which suggests that they were transgender women.

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Clear manifestations of sexual and gender diversity permeates the books of Arabic and Islamic heritage which is how we know how our ancestors were able to come out in different ways, and how some of them played essential roles in paving the way for other manifestations.

Our ancestors had their own concepts about gender and sexuality as well as their own terminology, in which they expressed them by. Although these terms may not match our current concepts, yet they have provided the diverse spectra of the queer community with better circumstances than what we now live in.

All of this is a matter of pride of our ancestors, who have created spaces to express their different identities, and of us being a part of these societies that have been fighting violence and hatred and striving for the right of love in all its forms.

And just as our identities are colorful, our history is also colorful.