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A woman of culture

Negotiating Arabic and lesbian identity

an interview with

Moneira

Moneira lives in Melbourne where she works in a young women's service. In this short interview she articulates some of the complexities of negotiating Arabic and lesbian identities. Moneira can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre Publications. This interview was conducted over the phone by Claire Ralfs.

Within gay and lesbian contexts in Australia, there are strong notions about being 'out and proud'. How do these fit with your Arabic community context?

They don't fit at all! For a whole range of reasons, I'm not 'out and proud' in the Arabic community. Far from it, I take care so that members of the Arabic

This chapter was originally published in

D. Denborough (Ed.). (2002). *Queer counselling and narrative practice* (pp. 240-246). Dulwich Centre Publications.

community do not think I am lesbian. I take care with how I dress and how I act. Being lesbian is a significant part of my identity, and I have some sadness that I can't share this realm of my life with many of the people whom I love. Perhaps most sadly, when I've had partners, I haven't been able to take them home, and I know how much my mum loves feeding another person.

It sounds like you know the Arab community would not be very receptive to your lesbian identity, what about the other way around...can you say a bit about your experience of being Arabic within the lesbian community? How is your Arabic identity received in that realm?

I've been out in the lesbian community for three years now. Going into the lesbian community at first reminded me of when I began university. Back then, I was a young woman from the western suburbs going to Melbourne University, moving from a largely working class world to a place of the 'establishment'. It was quite an experience meeting people from different classes, different backgrounds. There were very few Arabs and not many others from non-Anglo cultures. I found the same thing going into the lesbian community. I had thought it would be a welcoming place, I guess that was naivety. I actually found it quite alienating. There are so many ways of being in the lesbian community that I find make me feel lonely, isolated and cold.

A part of this is due to the fact that my Arabic culture and heritage is never acknowledged or recognised within the lesbian community unless I draw attention to it. There are only a few lesbians I know with whom I can talk about being an Arab person. Well, it's a bit more complex than that because there are other lesbian Arabs in Melbourne but they make up almost a separate community and I've never really been into segregation. It's hard to find a balance and a place to be.

It's also tricky because within the lesbian community, being out and visible is a basis for connection. As I am not out within the Arab community it makes connections with other lesbians more complex.

We have talked before about you being a woman of culture, and that there are particular practices of culture that are not well understood within the lesbian community. I wonder if you can talk a little bit more about this ...

Well, I'm 30 years old and I am not 'out' as a lesbian to my parents. That is perhaps the biggest gap between Arabic culture and the Anglo world. The majority of the lesbian community would be very negative about my decision not to tell my parents. They would be quick to make judgments. But I have my reasons, and many of these are cultural. It wouldn't work for me in my community to be a visible lesbian.

Some of this is because of the homophobia of the Arab community which would be directed not only towards me but towards my family. As a political left wing lesbian Arab woman, various Anglo women tell me that I have a great opportunity to be out and lead the way in my community. Perhaps this is true, but I don't believe it is their place to make this judgment. They have no idea what the consequences would be for my life or my family.

Coming out for Anglo lesbians is very different than for Arab lesbians. Many people of Arab communities have recently migrated to this country. They are here without the supports they would have in their homeland. Many families have made great sacrifices for their children to be here. Many of the countries from where they come are very poor. All of these things shape the responses that families make to young Arab people when they come out. It is not a simple situation. There can be violence. And people from many Arab countries are not used to the idea of being able to appeal to the Anti-Discrimination Board or other structures. I regularly work with Arab and Middle Eastern women who are running away from home and I know that there are not support services that can realistically assist them. I know this because I work in the area.

There is an enormous amount of privilege that influences the views and understandings held by the Anglo lesbian community. I appreciate this privilege. I feel incredibly privileged to be living the sort of life I am in this country. I think of my cousins in Egypt who don't have the sorts of rights and opportunities that I have here. Neither did my parents. My father always used to say to me, don't ever take it for granted what this country has given us. As an Arab lesbian I don't take anything here for granted. I live with considerable privilege.

Can you tell me about some of the things that have assisted you to live a life as a lesbian Arab woman?

Like many people, I needed to overcome the shame that is caused by homophobia, and this took quite a long time. I guess this involved a process of accepting of who I was and wanted to be. Coming to know other lesbians who were not ashamed made a difference. A lesbian colleague that I work with was particularly supportive, we would laugh together and there was something about joining in laughter about all that we as lesbians have to contend with that was really helpful.

But it was actually when I was travelling that I fully came to terms with my sexuality. I returned to Egypt and was smoking a pipe one day at a coffee shop with my cousin when I told her I was a lesbian. She had the best reaction. She said, 'I'm really shocked, but then again I'm not'. This was the same reaction my brother had. They also both said in the same breath, 'You know you can never tell your family.' And I said, 'Yeah, I know.' But I had told them and they are family too. My cousin and I shared a bed for the three months after I told her and so she wasn't at all disturbed by it. I experienced her as very accepting. Having my brother know is excellent. When I spend time with him, I feel complete, I am myself. He is family and he knows who I am. All his friends know as well and they ask me questions, it's quite funny. So there are pockets of acceptance within my community through my brother and my cousin in Egypt. Maybe there will be one or two of my cousins here in Australia who will also be safe options in the future.

This is really interesting to me. Rather than the 'out and proud' ethic of the (mainly Anglo) lesbian community, you seem to be living by a different ethic. You've clearly taken risks to talk to people from your Arabic community about your lesbian identity, but you are clear that it is not appropriate to tell others in your family. Can you tell me more about this different way of operating... is it linked in any way to Arabic culture?

If I was to tell my mother that I am a lesbian it would break her heart. It would cause her extreme pain and difficulty in her community. She is already going through a very difficult time having lost my dad relatively recently. There is no way I am going to break my mother's heart. If that means I have to adjust my life accordingly, then I am willing to do that. Within the Anglo lesbian world there is little respect for this, it is often seen as the coward's way out. But I do not see it

this way.

As an Arabic person, I have what is both a burden and a privilege, a duty to honour my parents for as long as I live. All Arab people have this duty, both men and women. In Egypt this means one thing. In Australia, the generations struggle over what this duty means. In our family it has meant both generations meeting half way between the cultural ways of Egypt and the cultural ways of Australia. My parents met me half way – sure it was a bit of a struggle for a while, perhaps it took 24 years - but they met me half way, and I honour this. My parents migrated countries for my future and for my brother's future. They have done everything they can to make sure that we live happy and prosperous lives. They have made many contributions to my quality of life and my capacity to live a life of my choosing.

If I was living in Egypt, I'd probably be married with kids by now. And for the person I am today, that would be horrible! But here I am. I have my own place. I am a lesbian. I can do my own thing. Everything I have here is a privilege that has been granted to me by my parents. They've met me half way and I have a duty to them to do the same. To tell my mother I am lesbian is not meeting her half way. It would be to break her heart and that's something I am not going to do.

I imagine that the ways in which you have lived within these different worlds has led to you to develop particular knowledges about identity, about life ... can you say a bit about this?

One thing it has meant, is that I have developed a sense of clarity about what is fair and what is not fair. I have a sensitivity, interest and curiosity in fairness. I think this is because I have had to balance that in my own life for a long time. I've had to think through what Egyptian cultural practices I think are fair enough for me to engage with, and which Anglo cultural practices I think are fair to participate in. I've also witnessed up close, many different versions fairness, of pride and dignity. I think of my father when I mention these things. In my culture, pride and dignity are crucial concepts of identity. My father had very rich ways of understanding what it means to be treated fairly and to live a proud and dignified life.

How do you think these special knowledges influence your work with young women?

I think I had some sort of sensitivity to understanding what people can and can't do depending on their own context. For instance, I can see very clearly if someone is being setup to fail. I see the broader influences on people's lives and I'm also quick to look for cultural meanings where others might ignore them.

Recently, a group of professional women came out to talk to the young women at the youth service where I work. The way in which the meeting was set up meant that only the white young women felt comfortable to speak. There was a cultural gap in the protocols, but this was understood in a certain way by those who had come to visit. They thought that these islander young women were gang members who were sticking together and not opening their mouths. Their silence was seen as a form of rebellion, but I could see quite clearly this wasn't the case.

Afterwards, when I spoke with the young women they said that they hadn't felt as if they the right to speak. In many cultures there are different understandings about when it is appropriate to speak and when it is not. These young women of culture were actually quite softly spoken and their actions had been completely misunderstood. They would need a context to be created in which they felt entitled to speak. These sorts of cultural misunderstandings happen all the time. I think because of my own experience I have a sensitivity to them.

What advice would you give to other workers who are relating to Arab women, especially in relation to matters of sexuality?

When I think about that question, it makes me wonder what would have been most helpful to me. You know, I reckon it would be great to receive some acknowledgment that it can be pretty tricky being both Arabic and lesbian! If there could be respect for what it takes to balance a life between Arabic identity and lesbian identity it would make it easier. It would make it easier if there was respect for the struggle, and also respect for Arab culture.

The homophobia in the Arab community that I mentioned earlier, is just one aspect of a huge culture. Like many cultures, my culture is homophobic. But my culture is also very loving and hospitable and caring. There are many

beautiful aspects of being Arabic that I treasure.

We have a bond of family that I respect. No matter how low you get, there will always be people there for each other. We have ways of relating with food and celebrations that I delight in. And then there's the laughter...we can laugh for hours. My uncle makes up stories and we laugh. We sit around together and we all go out together. This is the beauty of living life through extended family relationships. There are also smaller traditions that are of both family history and cultural history. There is the giving of gifts, the rituals that bring with them a sense of belonging. There's a generosity and, of course, the language which holds its own meanings and metaphors and ways of understanding life. Then there is music...I could go on...I feel very privileged to live with all of this and more.

For workers who are relating to young lesbian Arabic women, I think it would be significant to acknowledge their struggle and to respect it, while at the same time respecting their culture. This is what would have meant a lot to me.

At the moment there is considerable hostility being directed towards the Arab community in Australia – especially in relation to asylum seeker issues. How are you and others in your community managing to sustain life, and relationships and love and passion during these times?

There are many different ways. With my close friends we try always to laugh, while in my work, it is taking action that sustains me. I am involved in a range of projects to try to address the effects of racism on young Arab people. Knowing that I do a good job at this is sustaining. I'm proud that I'm an Arabic woman who is living in Melbourne and who is a lesbian. It's made me strong and I know now that I will always land on my feet.

But perhaps what sustains me the most is knowing that I'm privileged. It humbles me when I get an email from my cousin who's been waiting for two and half years for a phone line. Knowing that I'm privileged sustains me, and it invites me to take action. No matter how difficult life can be here, it could be so much more difficult. Life is so much more difficult for other Arabs, for other women, for other lesbians. We must do something about this.