

# From the Belly of Arab Queer Activism: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Introduction

Lately, the murmurs of Arab LGBT activists have been rising against a "trend" whose critical discourse delves deeper into questions surrounding our organizational strategies as LGBT/queer movements in Arab societies, our relationship to the "West" and the hegemony of Western experiences in LGBT organizing, the suitability of our strategies to our social, cultural and political contexts, and the continuing challenges in building bridges between our thought and our on-ground practices. All these questions have been reduced to a discourse that apparently has one single concern and aim: to fight the West. The debate was further heated after activists published some of these ideas and experiences, in Arabic, particularly in Bekhsoos and Qadita.net's Queeriyatcolumn.

The goal behind investing in writing our experiences of organizing in this field is to institutionalize and develop the continuing discourse at the local level. We do this not simply for educational purposes, but also because of our awareness of the importance of sharing local experiences, and opening the door for continuous debates on the local, regional and international levels. These discussions, we understand, rely mainly on processes of self-reflection (whether personal or collective), and on the ways we present differences in our understandings of queer and LGBT struggles. More importantly, they rely on how we perceive and practice our roles as queer and LGBT activists in our societies.

In this essay, we hope to show that the development of this discourse is the result of the summation of ten years of different grassroots experiences built on critiquing and rejecting power structures and dominance on the basis of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class (feminist) and on analyzing the limitations of identity-based LGBT organizing with a passion for equality (queer). Besides our determination in defining, in our own words, and making accessible what is often a reduced and misinterpreted discourse, we also seek to address some of the challenges confronted in the process of expressing our values and perspectives within current debates on gender/sexuality strategies and frameworks.

## Problematics of a Polarizing LGBT Discourse

What this debate does (and we intentionally did not use the word 'conversation' here) is that it goes

toward attempts to create an inorganic and unauthentic division into two primary trends. The first trend is accused of “fighting the west” and the other, as a response, of “fighting those who fight the west.” This division is all too disturbingly familiar, because it utilizes the same illusory binary structure that we as queer (and some LGBT) activists are working to challenge, which is the binary of sexuality and gender. This discourse is predicted to threaten us and our groups because it sheds light on sensitive areas regarding our own internalization of (and sometimes compliance with) the hegemony of western discourse (and please note that the keyword here is ‘hegemony’, not ‘western’).

In addition to attempting to label our discourse as “anti-western”, this other trend identifies itself only through opposing the first trend, instead of investing in crystallizing its arguments in solid ways and without falling into the trap of simply making statements (such as comparing the ‘westernism’ of feminism to that of LGBT activism, for example). As such, a form of hesitant bargaining subtly emerges – one that rarely ever materializes itself into a full-fledged, thought-out, and contextualized analysis.

The potential for fallacy begins when criticism of certain goals and strategies within mainstream models of LGBT organizing is singled out as “anti-Western”. This conflation is falsely built on the assumption that a critique of LGBT activism is actually one against the West as a whole. After all, “the West” does not only produce mainstream LGBT structures and models of organizing, does it? From the belly of the beast, initiatives such as the Audre Lorde Project, Queers for Economic Justice, and many more have had a history of producing powerful and alternative forms of queer organizing. This shows how, in essence, the argument is not only unsound but actually counterproductive as it conflates mainstream organizing with Western organizing and thus inadvertently reinforces a homogenization of the West. After taking this conflation as a premise, camouflaged ad hominem arguments usually follow, in attempts to expose our relationships to the West – through our attire, choice of language, our feminism, etc.

### **“If LGBT Activism is Western, then so is Feminism”**

Feminism has continuously and historically been challenged to adapt to the particularities of each personal and collective struggle. It has changed colors, forms, shapes, labels, meanings and connotations across the world and throughout history. It is persistently being molded as a mode of analysis that is highly sensitive to gender issues and politics of location.

Having said that, feminism, in many contexts, has also produced degrees of privileges within different categories of identification (racial, ethnic, economic, sectarian). Like LGBT activists, feminists can and do often fall into the trap of identity politics when they promote models of organizing, as well as values and lifestyles, as universal and relevant to all women around the world. Feminism however, in its ideal practices, seeks not to impose frames or values, but to keep alternative, empowering and contestatory norms in circulation. A good example would be International Women’s Day (IWD) which, while centered around women and advocating for a global day of action, is still flexible enough to contain the particularities of any woman’s struggle.

International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), for instance, is a prepackaged public event which equates the LGBT struggle to a fight against what is unquestionably labeled “homophobia”. It is by default prepackaged because the name alone – International Day Against Homophobia – automatically sets aside and defines the LGBT struggle, to the public, as one that is against homophobia. Our discourse against homophobia, which very often comes as a reaction, perpetuates the same spirit of hate and exclusion, and quite ironically, recreates binaries of “pride” and “shame”

(where pride is in homosexuality and tolerance, and shame is in homophobia and ignorance). Instead of taking a step back and rethinking our tactics in responding to the roots of homophobia in our societies, and the very notion of labeling homophobia as such, we invest in creating public events that are reluctant to tackle the larger political and social contexts of homophobia and which find root in institutional and social patriarchy. [1]

LGBT activism, in all its visible forms, promotes standardized ideals and constructs that build into LGBT culture, identity and activism. The Homophobia, Coming Out, Visibility, and Pride axis has continuously been shaping contemporary LGBT communities, their values and demands, around the world.

Within an LGBT framework, our struggles become issues of representation and privilege. We want those privileges too. We contribute to hierarchies that leave the transgenders, the non-identified, the bisexuals, the intersexed, the disabled, the migrants, the colored, the illiterate, and many more, at the bottom, and unworthy of rights.

Instead of looking at the ways privilege works to undermine any resistance in our societies, we focus instead on how it excludes us, and only us. When one's sexual orientation is a site of struggle, there is (little or) no examination of the privilege that still comes with "being a man" in conservative societies and within gendered legal frameworks, for example. Instead of identifying dominant norms that have historically produced exclusions based on any category of identification#, we invest in centralizing our marginalized struggles as LGBT, and leave others to do the same for theirs. We forget that "those other struggles" may be ours too.

Instead of critiquing the normative, in all its forms, we apologetically try to prove that we, the gays, the lesbians, are natural/normal too. Accept us. Support us. We ask for LGBT tolerance and acceptance, when we could be working towards justice and freedom from heteronormative patriarchy.

### **"Lesbians are Being Beaten up While you Theorize"**

What are even more distressing, are common statements such as "the gays are thrown in jails while you theorize" and "you're a privileged activist" that are often too quickly thrown at anyone who isn't using the framework and language of victimization to talk about (their own or) the LGBT struggle. This discourse is immediately marginalized, and we, silenced and dismissed, as its interpretations are dubbed irrelevant to "the real world in which 'victims' are suffering" while we're too busy questioning victimization as a framework to politically promote personal and collective struggles.

Abuse is real, and yes, it permeates our communities. For all we know, the so-called privileged speaker, is most likely to have gone through traumatic and abusive experiences at one point or another in their lives (and this is usually the case). However, the moment that speaker begins to question the strategic use of "victimhood" as a gateway to talk about sexual and gender rights, one is automatically dismissed, silenced, and accused of being too privileged to understand people's trauma. Claiming who is too privileged and who isn't only serves to create rifts and further reinforce counterproductive artificial binaries. The way to address privilege is to continuously examine and be aware of one's own situations and privileges.

There is difference between acknowledging and reclaiming a sense of healthy self-hood, (and with reclaiming comes a valuable sense of responsibility and ownership of one's healing process and one's relationship with thoughts, memories, feelings, scars, struggles), and collectively perpetuating experiences of trauma in the consumption of past victimhood.

With Bareed Mista3jil, for example, Meem sought to tell the stories of those whose "sexualities have been mocked, dismissed, denied, oppressed, distorted, and forced into hiding" (Bareed Mista3jil 1). Ever wondered how most of the stories, even the most painful and heartbreaking, were empowering? It's because they were told to inspire hope, love, forgiveness and overcoming. It is a powerful feminist storytelling model in which trauma and abuse are acknowledged, without the counterproductive employment of a victimization framework politically promoting individual or collective struggles.

When questioning the victimhood language and framework as a form of activism, we're not telling "victims" to "shut up and get over it" - as some rush to interpret - but instead, are addressing the victim mentality that the discourse promotes and which prevents so many of us from surviving and rising above situations of abuse. It is a framework that, in its most successful practices, still reinforces a culture of pity, wallowing and helplessness, and not solidarity, support, and self-empowerment.

### **From Deconstruction to Reconstruction / Production**

Our discourse focuses on the necessity of not adopting what is available and accessible without examining first its suitability to our context and to our goals. With this, we also emphasize the importance of producing and re-producing local experiences that, in turn, opens up space to destabilize power structures and to challenge the mainstream, locally and globally (and the emphasis here is on local production and not on fighting, even though we do not consider critiquing to be a war). The stigma of "fighting the west" and the "backwardness of the discourse" that our discourse is accused of, may be acceptable if the debate is simply on deconstructing western LGBT hegemony (even if it were a leading radical deconstruction and analysis). But this is not the heart of the discourse - which, in fact, relies on real experiences of different groups that are developing their own discourse, inspired by these experiences, and that have solid points of discussion that nurture their work (there is deconstruction, but its most important aspect is reconstruction/production).

Let us take, as an example of local reconstruction/production, the strategic gap filled by Palestinian Queers for BDS (PQBDS) - a group formed to promote and stand for the Palestinian civil society call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel, launched in July 2005. PQBDS determined the struggle against Israel's colonization, occupation and apartheid as its main struggle. Because Israel regularly uses LGBT rights and freedoms to pinkwash its violations of human rights and international law, PQBDS saw tremendous significance in leading a local (and international) queer initiative that counters pinkwash and promotes BDS. One of the powerful characteristics of PQBDS is in its ability to link the struggle for sexual and gender diversity with the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice.

This discourse is not new even though its presence and development has been limited in the safe and the distant academic world. What is new is talking about these issues from the perspective of local grassroots experiences to reinforce the definite connection between theory and practice. When this discourse is presented in the queer and LGBT fields on the local, regional and even the global levels, the challenge becomes the importance of taking into consideration the narrowness of Arab queer activism in this field.

Queer Arab activism can thus be seen as fertile land where personal sensitivities mix with political interests and competitiveness amongst different groups. Though these are natural elements of any movement or group, its danger lies in its ability to reduce the discussion towards poles headed by specific people who in the end become "the representative" or "the spokesperson" for these trends.

Enforcing such binaries — East/West, Mashreq/Maghreb, feminist/LGBT, etc. — which have become personal in and of themselves, forces other activists to choose their “loyalty” to one of these trends/leaders/groups and prevents them from exploring these issues and radical questions from a practical and theoretical viewpoint.

Perhaps the most complicated and most sensitive problem is that at every opportunity to share experiences and ideas amongst individuals and groups, whether through articles or meetings at conferences, we always seek to represent all the identities and genders and sexual orientations. We work to take all groups and trends into consideration (so that no one feels left out). Most of the time this is not the main goal, or the most important one. There is a vast difference between seeking inclusiveness and representation and our ability as activists to contain the structural complexities of our societies, the sensitivity of our struggle, our occupation with day-to-day issues, and our constant confrontation with the changes in our vision and the environments that we work in. Our goal is not to outreach and attract people who represent the different groups within LGBT and queer communities—an easier task to accomplish.

The more important goal is that the activists, and especially leading figures—and we apologize for this hierarchization, find points of intersection between gay, lesbian and transgender struggles, between feminism and queerness, between the struggle against occupation and the struggle for sexual liberation. We admit that there is extreme importance to belong to the Arab LGBT movement, to share and connect with activists from different groups and backgrounds. This fulfills different needs where the one commonality we have sometimes is that we are lesbian or gay or queer or trans.

What is more crucial, though, is our strategic and sustainable investment that has to go towards building alliances with groups and activists who rely in their organizing on common ideologies and basic issues that do not need explaining every time. We do not need to explain every time the importance of feminism to our gender and sexual struggle. We do not need to go back repeatedly to the danger of “marketing” our struggle as unique and one of its kind, or to why we cannot collaborate with Zionist gays on the basis that they are simply gay, and other things that we consider as key in our constant organizing to build a movement for social transformation that is viable and able to change whenever it needs to change.

## **Conclusion**

This essay is written as a modest attempt to analyze the dynamics and the discourse that is, fortunately, still in its early stages, but that can take a turn that will prove harmful to the development of any Arab queer movement. This attempt is inspired by our experiences as activists who are part of these dynamics, which we hope to deconstruct internally – allowing us to return to the core of the discussion instead of just stopping at its surface. Turning the present dispute to a shared and enriching conversation can only happen when all groups and activists take shared responsibility in building spaces that can contain a discourse that reflects our realities and embodies the endless challenges that we face. It is counterproductive to identify it as a war, with parties and trends. As for us, we understand our responsibility to be cautious of falling into the trap of cynicism and pessimism that we are sometimes accused of, rightfully, and that helps in diminishing the debate to binaries that do not represent our realities.

Along the four sections of this essay, we set out to explore the development of an emerging discourse that is built as a result of different grassroots experiences. We also intended to address some of the challenges confronted in expressing the limitations of identity-based LGBT organizing.

Unfortunately, there are multiple ways in which this discourse is muffled and dismissed, many of which are discussed at length in the above sections. Accordingly, it seems that a common thread runs through the hegemony of the LGBT (homophobia, coming out, visibility, and pride) axis and the rejection of possibilities to explore alternative ways of addressing sexuality and gender in our societies. The crucial point here is that we will continue to invest in building the aforementioned alliances with groups and activists who, quite simply, support critical thinking, are aware of feminist and queer analyses, and value the need for producing local frameworks of activism.

**Lynn Darwich and Haneen Maikey**

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<http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2011/10/from-the-belly-of-arab-queer-activism-challenges-and-opportunities/>

\* “From the Belly of Arab Queer Activism: Challenges and Opportunities” is also featured in Arabic on Queeriyat, Qadita.net.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] For a more thorough critique of IDAHO, you may examine Haneen Maikey and Sami Shamali’s article, available on ESSF (article or a more thorough critique of IDAHO), [artor a more thorough critique of IDAHO](#).