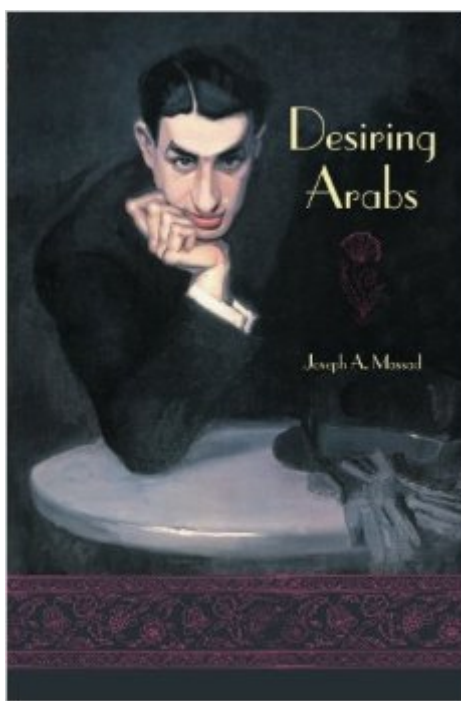


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# Desiring Arabs



## Synopsis

Sexual desire has long played a key role in Western judgments about the value of Arab civilization. In the past, Westerners viewed the Arab world as licentious, and Western intolerance of sex led them to brand Arabs as decadent; but as Western society became more sexually open, the supposedly prudish Arabs soon became viewed as backward. Rather than focusing exclusively on how these views developed in the West, in *Desiring Arabs* Joseph A. Massad reveals the history of how Arabs represented their own sexual desires. To this aim, he assembles a massive and diverse compendium of Arabic writing from the nineteenth century to the present in order to chart the changes in Arab sexual attitudes and their links to Arab notions of cultural heritage and civilization. A work of impressive scope and erudition, Massad's chronicle of both the history and modern permutations of the debate over representations of sexual desires and practices in the Arab world is a crucial addition to our understanding of a frequently oversimplified and vilified culture. A pioneering work on a very timely yet frustratingly neglected topic. . . . I know of no other study that can even begin to compare with the detail and scope of [this] work. "Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Middle East Report* In *Desiring Arabs*, [Edward] Said's disciple Joseph A. Massad corroborates his mentor's thesis that orientalist writing was racist and dehumanizing. . . . [Massad] brilliantly goes on to trace the legacy of this racist, internalized, orientalist discourse up to the present. "Financial Times

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Much has been made about the status of non-heterosexual people in the Middle East, their plight, their struggles and their loyalties. More often than not, this issue is dealt with rather predictably as one of conservative reactionary Muslims in the region denying full equality and dignity to people with different sexual orientations. In other words, that the culture is fundamentally homophobic. An opposing, equally ridiculous response is that of the former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who claimed that there were no homosexuals in Iran. Joseph Massad seeks to set the record straight on this issue with his book *Desiring Arabs*. Massad launches an intellectual assault on a central assumption behind both pronouncements: that "homosexuality", as a category of sexual relations, is a cross-cultural concept that people simply fall into or not. According to Massad, such an assumption reads a modern European understanding of sexual relations onto a cultural framework where such divisions were not present. Tracing a genealogy of the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy in true Foucauldian genealogical fashion, he identifies this psychiatric-medical concept in its Victorian colonial milieu and shows how it spread with western knowledge into bourgeois parts of the Arab world, where Arab intellectuals adopted it and other ideas in order to recreate themselves as "modern" in line with liberal European precepts of the time.

This book, like Edward Said's *Orientalism* gives the impression that the west is the source of everything that is wrong not only with the Arab-Muslim world but also the West, in a sense that western scholarship and perceptions are always 'racist'. But what does this mean? The Arabs and the West are not monoliths. The black Arabic speakers of Southern Iran, the Hebronite Arabs, the Southern 'Latin' Italians and the Irish are diverse peoples that do not deserve to be lumped together into simple categories of 'racist west' and 'victimized Arab'. The thesis here is that in the 19th century westerners viewed Arabs racistly as being sexually promiscuous and licentious, as desiring women too much. In the 20th century however the West is supposed to have become sexually open and suddenly the Arabs became 'conservative' and prudish. But why was this so? Is it true that the west's attitudes towards sex forced the west to view Arabs differently? Did Arabs also change? The book answers this question by claiming that Arab attitudes towards sex in the 19th century changed because of the west and that a Nahda or renaissance took place, in which Arabs internalized western ideas of sex. It is strange how racist a thesis this is for a book that accuses the west of viewing the Arabs in an unfair manner. This thesis claims that Arabs have never thought for themselves, that they are monoliths, and can only change at the behest of the west. But what of the Ruwalla tribe of Arabia? What of the Dajani family of Jerusalem? What of the slave stalls of Cairo where women were sold to harems, or the dancing girls of Cairo?

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