

Between Patriarchy and Occupation:

Rauda Morcos and Palestinian Lesbian Activism for Bodily Rights

Interview by Samar Habib and Nayla Moujaes

Rauda Morcos is a Palestinian activist who was publically outed in 2003 when Morcos agreed to be interviewed for *Yediot Ahoronot*. Although Morcos asked that her sexual orientation not be made a subject of or an issue in the article, the journalist referred to her as a “lesbian” in the story’s bold letter headline and included a large photograph of her. As a result, in the span of a few days there was literally no one among Israel’s Palestinian population who did not know who Morcos was or that she was a lesbian. Of course, the newspaper’s contempt for Morcos’s insistence on restoring to herself an erased Palestinian indigeneity meant that outing her was an act of malevolence intended to cause her harm within communities that are perceived to be monolithically homophobic. As a result of being outed as a lesbian, Morcos was repeatedly harassed, physically assaulted, and had her car vandalized so many times that her local mechanic and smash repairer in Kufur Yassif stopped charging her for fixing it. She also lost her livelihood and position as an educator due to her refusal to deny her sexual orientation once it became public. During this time and for the following five years, Morcos became the face and voice for Aswat, a Haifa-based group for Palestinian gay women, which was then the only group of its kind in the Arab region.

In 2006 Morcos was awarded the Felipa De Souza award by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in recognition of the important role she plays in LGBTIQ rights activism. Morcos has acted as a board member and international advisor for numerous women’s and human

rights organizations, including the Urgent Action Fund (U.S.A.), Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice (U.S.A.), The Global Alliance for LGBTIQ Education (Netherlands), Mama Cash (Netherlands), The Coalition of Women for Peace (Israel), The Global Fund for Women (U.S.A.), the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), The Association for Women’s Rights in Development, the International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organizing, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), the Women Human Rights Defenders Network and Human Rights Watch. She is currently acting as a regional LGBTIQ organizer for the Middle East and North Africa region. She also works as a freelancer with Hivos (Netherlands). In addition to organizing and advocating for human rights, Morcos is studying law at the Carmel Academic Center in Haifa.

Samar Habib and Nayla Moujaes: How did you become an activist? First for Palestinian rights and then for queer Palestinian rights?

Rauda Morcos: Maybe I was an activist all my life. I don’t know what the word “activist” means exactly, for me it’s about social development. I imagine that the environment I was born in compelled me to be an activist. I don’t understand how people cannot be. By contrast, I don’t judge any Palestinian living inside the 1948 borders who doesn’t want to be involved politically. Social and psychological pressures are immense, and even when they are subtle and discreet, they can force people to conceal their principles and to give up. Let me give you an example: There are Palestinian people inside the

'48 borders who are active politically, advocating for human rights, the rights of minorities and the right of return, but these people are faced with many obstacles. They face obstacles at school or university or when seeking employment. So, there are a lot of Palestinians inside Israel for whom Palestine is over and I do understand them, I understand that they feel a sense of hopelessness in relation to the Palestine issue generally, and may be experiencing hopelessness in relation to their own lives more specifically.

As for me, maybe I got my activism from my grandmother, may the Goddesses rest her soul. My grandmother lived most of her life in domestic spaces, raising children. She lived the *Nakba* more than once, and she was maybe not an activist in a traditional sense but she was aware of the occupation and military rule. Having been a widow with several children for whom she needed to secure a livelihood, she used to tell us all these stories but she never came up to me and said "go and resist Israel". For me though, I acquired a political consciousness from an early age, as a result of my relationship with her. And I realized that the Palestinian flag needed to be hoisted. When I was a child it was forbidden for us to carry a Palestinian flag inside Israel, but nowadays these limitations don't exist. When we were children we weren't even allowed to say the word "Palestine" at school. At school we would be forced to celebrate Israeli Independence Day. Many of the teachers though would say to us "we are supposed to teach you specific material but we are not going to". In fact, we had this one [Palestinian] teacher who told us the story of the *Nakba* in detail. Had anyone gone and told the authorities about him, he would have surely been sacked from the school. Fortunately, however, we were a close-knit group. But if anyone had known that he even brought us a guest speaker from our village, an eyewitness who knew stories that I think the whole world doesn't know about, the kind of insider knowledge that only those inside the 1948 borders would know, he would have been punished for it, for sure.

My primary activism is that I want to say the word "Palestine" without being afraid of anyone.

Secondly, at some stage, you start to grow up inside a problematic society, a society that is patriarchal in the first degree. And it's not just that the Palestinian society is this way of its own accord; it is also a society which exists within a state which was forced upon the population, and so we have the feeling that we have to prove ourselves. The expectation is that you grow up, get an education, get married, and have children. My personal activism was that I didn't want to be that person; I didn't want to follow that order!

S.H. & N.M.: What do you see as overlaps between Palestinian identities and rights and queer ones?

R.M.: First of all, I think that terms like "Palestinian" or "Queer" or anything like that are things that construct¹ us, they confine us, but they are also necessary. I think the Palestinian identity and the Queer identity converge in being both marginalized and they are both about resisting oppression. For me personally, I am an advocate of our rights as human beings first. Everything else may follow from that. I care about the struggle of disabled people in society as much as I care about women's rights or Palestinian rights for example. These are all linked and have the same sources of oppression. Between you and me, I wish I didn't have to be nationalistic, I am not a fan of nationalism. If circumstances were not what they are I would never use terms such as "Palestinian" or "Queer" to describe myself, but rather "human". But, we live in a society which necessitates the use of these terms, because without them, it might be even harder to resist, and then you are silenced.

S.H. & N.M.: There's a lot of talk about how International NGOs in the USA, the UK, and the Netherlands, who are possibly well-meaning, potentially make things worse for queers of the Arab region by not approaching the issues from a culturally sensitive perspective. Can you tell us how your experience working with different West-based NGOs has been, and assess for us how much these NGOs help and how much they hinder the process of achieving queer rights and respectability in the region?

R.M.: Yes, this is a critique often associated with Joseph Massad. I tend to agree with Massad on the issue that there are some international LGBTIQ organizations that have a missionary approach. These organizations can do more damage than good, because they think they have the recipe for success and want to see this same recipe implemented in the same way across very different contexts, and of course what works in one place may not work at all in another. But I think Massad misses something in his critique. You know, as we speak, I happen to be in Spain and just yesterday I was in a transgender march against transphobia. I was surrounded by non-Arabs, mostly Westerners and I did not feel at all alienated, or that this struggle was not somehow confluent with our own in our region, or that these people would not be able to understand what we were going through. I think this is what Massad forgets. And the approach to LGBTIQ rights activism in the Arab world or anywhere differs from organization to organization, from one activist to another. Even the Arab world itself is not monolithic and different national contexts require different approaches.

I also don't think that just because I am an Arab I'm automatically able to understand the experience of another Arab from our vast region. Frankly, as a Palestinian I find myself relating better to Chicana women and other indigenous peoples than some Egyptian people. I find more in common between myself and an Amazigh activist than I do with the Lebanese or Jordanian activists I come into contact with. To me, I see Lebanese activists as related to me through a common language, not much more.² So, there is a lot of complexity here that, I think, Massad misses. These are the people and organizations he misses in his critique. The interrelation I have as a Palestinian with a native American, or a Chicana or an Australian Aboriginal is that of a people on whom a foreign rule was imposed and from whom the land was taken – whether we are talking about an Islamic imposition of the Eastern Empire in Africa or the British mandate in Palestine or the French mandate in Western Arabia, or what have you.

That said, I do think that sometimes missionary

organizations do make things potentially worse for queers of the Arab world. Executions in Iran may be getting worse in a bid to resist the challenge and the international pressure mounted by organizations like ILGA and IGLHRC. Also, you have to take into account that some Arab activists think that the West is the solution. I don't judge them, I think I need to cooperate with these people. There are women who came to Aswat who wouldn't use the word "Palestine" and we had to accommodate them. I found that through their interactions with us, at some point their points of view began to change, and that I had an impact on them. So, yes, it is true that some Western organizations are trying to erase cultural variance and difference by selling a particular model, and there are Arabs who buy into this, but this is not the picture as a whole.

S.H.: With Helem and Meem in Lebanon, Aswat and al-Qaws in Palestine, Abu Nuwas for Algerian LGBTIQs, Bedaya for Sudanese LGBTIQs, and many other similar organizations springing up, I wanted to ask you about the differences you see between these and international NGOs. Do you think these grassroots organizations are more effective than international NGOs or are they mimicking the missionary recipe you discussed above, as Massad would argue?

R.M.: The thing that really excites me about these grassroots organizations is that they operate very dissimilarly from each other, each of them is following its own recipe. Sometimes there are overlaps and similarities, but how might these overlaps occur? Let me give you an example. In Lebanon there is a law against homosexuality and this law was copied from the French during the French mandate. You will find that this is very similar to the laws that are found in Algeria, for the same reason. By the same token, when we look at countries that were under a British mandate, like Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) and Egypt, you will find that there were no specific laws against homosexuals. There are some vague laws that can be applied but nothing specific. There are some cultural similarities between the Palestinian and the Lebanese contexts, even if the origins of the legal systems are different. The Palestinian

Authority tried to introduce secular laws, and so did Lebanon, despite its multi-confessional³ nature. The Palestinian context is also similar to the Lebanese context for another reason: the feminist movements began in those countries at roughly the same time in the 80s. Our queer movement didn't come from nowhere, there was fertile ground for us to emerge from social contexts suitable for us.

I don't believe, if you are going to compare us to the West and claim that NGOism is a Western thing, that you would be right. Philanthropic organizing is not a Western invention, it is quite ancient. In the Islamic world it was and is known as "*zakat*", where you are supposed to support social development. So this isn't exactly a Western thing. If I were to criticize the West for its missionary impulse, I should do the same about the Islamic empire and what it did in Arab lands [S.H.: and Africa and Asia]... exactly.

I think Joseph Massad in his critique gives the West a kind of a status above the Arab world. The West has been liberated but we shouldn't or even couldn't. His criticism of the queers of the Middle East tends to hold us at a lower level, as though we are just mimicking the West. I say no, we are who we are, and we choose our own struggle, and make our own decisions. The language we use is our language, and if we are going to translate any terms or theories, this is our right, and we choose our own way and make our own decisions and struggles.

S.H. & N.M.: The internet has been a site for some serious social change in the past two decades. People who are concerned about anonymity, who in a pre-internet world might not have had access to others like them, can now exist in a virtual place where they can feel safe but also connect. I wonder if you can talk to us a little bit about the way lesbian activists in our region have utilized the internet to carry out cyber activism. For example, we know that most of the members of official lesbian organizations are not out, and yet they are also very active.

R.M.: The very first group of women I met, who were also Arab and lesbian, lived in a neighboring

Arab country (for security reasons I can't tell you where). How we met had a lot to do with the internet. I had written an article under a pseudonym talking about being a Palestinian lesbian and imagining a queer Palestinian state and asking where all the other Arab lesbians are. A woman in this neighboring country found it and translated it and asked my publisher, who was a Jewish Israeli woman, how she could get in contact with me. We corresponded by phone, I didn't have an email account back then, but in this city to which I was invited there was a gay friendly internet cafe. It was the first time I saw an Arab world that looked like a gay oasis to me, but we are talking about a middle-upper class culture here, and I was from the middle-lower class so it was a cultural shock. So I was invited to lunch at this woman's house and her mother was asking me "do your parents know you are a lesbian?" and I was shocked by how accepted she was at home. She even lived on her own and had daily visitors. We became friends and I met her community of friends as well. After I left I knew I wanted something like this in Palestine, to create our own community. It was clear to me that because we didn't have a big Arab city inside the 1948 borders that the organizing was going to be different. I started to research where I might be able to find women like myself. I tried local Jewish NGOs. Shortly after, Black Laundry – an Israeli Jewish gay group against occupation – was set-up, so I went to them and found out about Samira. I looked for her and found out that apparently she had been looking for me too, because I was very out and had a reputation. Eventually, a Canadian woman who knew both of us put us in touch and we met. We discussed that we needed to create some kind of group for Palestinian lesbians and that we would have to find them. So we started to look and if you seek you find. Even though neither Samira nor I were internet savvy, the two Palestinian women we met, Dayna and Reem, were both thinking of creating an email list for gay Palestinian women. At that time I had found out about some internet Arab lesbian websites like Bint el-Nas, 'Assal and an international email list, through a contact in Jordan, but we also wanted to reach people who weren't privileged. There are a lot of women in

Aswat, for example, who don't have an email account and don't use computers. But cyberspace remains extremely important because it creates links not just among LGBTIQ people, but with non-LGBTIQ people, people internationally, from different backgrounds. At a local level, cyberspace is important but it is not the most important, but in terms of regional efforts this is where it becomes essential in building networks.

S.H.: Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, we've noticed that not only voices for democratic change are now being heard, but we've also seen how the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamists in Morocco have spoken up about changing the constitution to specifically state that marriage is between a man and woman to the exclusion of others, and this is something that is unprecedented. This is the type of constitutional change that we saw in the U.S.A. when George W. Bush introduced the Defense of Marriage Act. We also saw an equivalent legislative change under the Howard government in Australia. So, it's interesting to see that the Arab Spring brings both a threat of further enmeshing homophobia in legal codes and the promise of civic pluralism. What is the significance in your opinion of the current revolutions in the MENA for LGBTIQ rights? Will they provide an opportunity for the type of social change required, from the ground up, to officially create a safe space for queers residing within Arab states?

R.M.: You know, we started [LGBTIQ activism] before the Arab Spring. I think there is something in the region that is allowing these changes to occur. I give all the credit to civil society because I know that local organizations in all the countries did a lot of groundwork to facilitate these events. I do not deny that there is credit due to all facets of civil society, including the queer movement and the feminist and human rights groups... all of these have been facilitating this change for a period of time, and so I wasn't surprised to see what happened, it was the time for it. It is my dream that we don't repeat our mistakes. I wish these revolutions will take people to a place where they realize that patriarchy proved its failure, so let's make something new. But that's what's still missing.

We are still focused on male leaders, unfortunately. Let me give you an example. When Mahmood Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority (P.A.), delivered a speech about the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations in September, who wrote his speech? It seemed to me that Hanan Ashrawi wrote a great part of his speech. So, ok he's a big leader, but it was clear that this was Hanan Ashrawi's thinking and writing style. She would completely overshadow him if she had been the leader of the P.A. So all these systems we have that center around the leader, the president or the king, are inadequate and I am against that. Can't we find an alternative form of government? Why not have more than one leader? Why don't we operate as a collective? The queer communities in the region operate in this way and we might play a big part in the construction of this alternative society, at least I hope so.

S.H.: Do you think these revolutions are in a sense revolutions against patriarchy?

R.M.: I see them as revolutions against the system, but I don't think patriarchy has yet been challenged.

S.H.: Yes, I was thinking about what happened specifically to a group of feminist protestors in Egypt who were incarcerated by the Egyptian military and had virginity tests administered on them publically. I mean, this kind of humiliation is very specifically targeted against the woman's body and implies that virginity is synonymous with honor, which is a patriarchal notion of ownership of women's sexualities and bodies. In this instance, the revolutionaries were betrayed by a purportedly interim regime that was supposed to have replaced the overthrown president.

S.H. & N.M.: Do you envision a queer-friendly Arab state in our lifetime? Where might it be? And if not, can you just fantasize for us what such a thing would look like? And how important is such an achievement to the queers of the MENA?

R.M.: Personally, I'm optimistic and I don't think anything is impossible. It depends on what you wish for. I wish to have a queer-friendly country, and

my wish will come true if I work toward this goal. I think all Arab countries today have the potential to be queer-friendly. The matter is not related to the government, it depends on us [queers]. If we want the government to be queer-friendly, and if we work toward achieving this task, which is not an easy one, we can attain it. It is our decision. I think we are on our way. I even think that Palestine is ready to be queer-friendly, not because of Western pressure but because the queers in Palestine are working against occupation and they are proving to their community and society that they are part of this nation, and that they are not outsiders. I know from my experience in Aswat that when we used to say we were “Palestinian gay women”, some non-queer Palestinian groups used to find this bothersome. They used to say to us: “What business do you have with the Palestinian struggle? You are lesbians and that’s it”. But we always insisted that Palestine is part of our struggle and we would not deny our Palestinian identity. In fact, you can’t really effectively work on your queer identity without knowing that it is part of your larger struggle as a Palestinian. After some time, and after a lot of work we were able to link these two struggles. When groups wanted to release statements against the Israeli occupation or oppression, or to sign petitions, even in the media, we found that we were being asked to join our voices to their voices. This is a big step for us and for the Palestinian society at large, because the Palestinian society needs to be aware of all of its constituent parts. And the question is: how do we as local groups use this change and mobilize it to our advantage?

S.H. & N.M.: There has been a lot of diplomatic and tactical effort on the part of the Israeli state to mobilize its greater acceptance of Israeli queers as a kind of a trump card to “pinkwash” its violations of Palestinian human rights. In that context, what has your experience of Israeli NGOs been in relation to supporting Palestinian queers? To what extent are these NGOs outspoken about their government’s poor human rights record, and in what sense are they subsumed by its efforts at homonationalism?

R.M.: This is a big topic. This is a matter that has existed long before people became aware of it and long before the term “pinkwashing” emerged. This

is the one thing that wherever you travel in the West everyone asks you about. Even when you say you are Palestinian in the West, someone is bound to stop you and say, “Ah, but in Israel there are queer groups and it is the only oasis in the Middle East”. But that’s not true, I don’t know what they are talking about when they say “oasis” or refer to “queer rights” in Israel. I know a little bit about law now and I know that the Israeli law is among the most developed in the world, but this doesn’t mean that it is applied in reality. In fact, the Haifa Forum is the only Israeli LGBTIQ group that still tries to address homophobia and transphobia. This suggests to me that these phobias still exist. There is homophobia, transphobia, and racism. Even the concept of democracy, while it exists as a concept, is not applied on the ground.

So this is an aspect of the “pinkwashing” that they do, that Israel is a nation of great kindness to LGBTIQ people.

S.H.: Yes, in fact, an article published on the news website Mako on September 19, 2011, indicated that the health ministry in Israel had just issued a directive to health service providers to de-list homosexuality as a disease. This seems very incongruent with the idea of the gay oasis, to be sure.

R.M.: When we in Aswat were talking about the oppression of Palestinians, the Agudah⁴ came out saying how they save Palestinian gay men and bring them to Israel. I once asked the directorship at Agudah: “Where are all these Palestinian gay men from the West Bank and Gaza that you are claiming to be saving?” I know it’s not easy to be gay in the West Bank, but it’s not easy being gay in Ghana either, or in the U.S.A. And it’s not easy to be gay in Israel (except in Tel Aviv). My struggle with Israeli LGBTIQ organizations is also around the issue of occupation. They are not willing to recognize the occupation. They can be gay and serve in the Israeli army. For me this is something that doesn’t make sense. How can you be queer and understand oppression and be aware of it and then also serve in the military? It’s in this context that Israeli LGBTIQ organizations began to plan

for hosting International World Pride (in 2006) at the same time that Israel was invading Lebanon and waging war in Gaza. Half the world can't even enter Israel, because many countries have no diplomatic relations with the country, and yet they were still preparing for an International World Pride event. So what does "international" mean here? According to Israel, "international" means the first world. But for me, "international" means the whole world, not just the first world. We, Aswat and Helem, who were the only Arab LGBT organizations back then in 2006, wrote a boycott statement against the World Pride to be hosted in Israel. In this statement we said that Israel was attempting to hide its daily crimes in Palestine and Lebanon, and that it was also using the LGBTIQ struggle for rights to imply that only Israel in the MENA region had a democratic regime and that the surrounding Arab countries are dark⁵ and primitive in contrast. In this way, Israel was also trying to put pressure on different organizations around the world to support

it in its so-called plight to save "democracy" and the projects they have to rescue the "poor" gay Palestinians who suffer in the West Bank and Gaza. Many groups around the world supported our statement and boycotted the International World Pride and the attempt of the Israelis to cover their massacres was quite unsuccessful.

S.H.: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today and for sharing your knowledge and insights with us. Is there anything else you want to add before we end this interview?

R.M.: Yes, I'd like to wrap this up with something I always say: Being a minority makes you a majority of the ones who are able to see the Other.

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ENDNOTES

1. Morcos uses the Arabic word "*birakboona*," which in Levant Arabic refers to *tarkeeb*, that is putting things together. No doubt she is referring to the social construction of identity.
2. Morcos is referring to the Levantine dialect spoken in Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Syria which differs substantially from other Arabic dialects such as those in Egypt and Sudan, North Africa or the Gulf.
3. The Arabic word "*tawa'if*" is translated as the more accurate "confessionalisms" and not "denominations".
4. The Agudah is the National Association of LGBT in Israel.
5. Morcos invokes the racism inherent in colonial discourse, such as that produced in relation to Africa as the "dark continent".