

When the Left Leg Shakes: Some Observations about Contemporary Arabic Anti-Masturbation Literature

LORENZ M. NIGST (Vienna)¹

'I never saw the mornin' 'til I stayed up all night.'

Tom Waits

'In fact, we defend ourselves better against morality than a (false) science of morals, a morality disguised as science.'

Pierre Bourdieu

*'It really is fantastic that we can just talk about 'selfies' and do a 'selfie' without being ashamed of it anymore and having to do it at night by yourself at the cricket pavilion.'*²

Introduction

In a lecture delivered at the *Collège de France* on the fifth of March 1975, Michel Foucault stated to have skimmed through a certain type of literature for a couple of months 'with considerable curiosity but also with considerable boredom.'³ With this remark Foucault referred to the body of texts that represented the backbone of what he called the 'crusade against masturbation' which commenced in the 18th century Europe with the publication of *Onania* and continued well into the 19th and even 20th century. Today this discourse on masturbation and its purportedly grim consequences seems to belong to times so thoroughly long gone that it is hard for us to believe that it could have had the massive impact it actually did at its time. It is equally hard to believe that someone should not be able to laugh about Ed Gamble's above quoted hilarious play with the

¹ Correspondence address: lorenz.nigst@univie.ac.at. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleagues Gebhard Fartacek and Daniel Mahoney for their kindness, expertise, and thoughtful comments. I also would like to express my thanks to Julia Gabriel, Verena Kienast, Hülya Celik, and Hildegard Mader for carefully reading the draft of the present article and commenting on it.

² 'Georgie Carlton' played by Ed Gamble in the New York episode of BBC America's faux-reality TV series *Almost Royal*.

³ Cf. Michel Foucault: *Die Anormalen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003; p. 304.

polysemy of 'selfie' in *Almost Royal*. But is it really true that the discourse, which at the same time 'bored' and 'fascinated' Foucault, is something that belongs entirely to the past? Does something similar maybe linger on somewhere else? Or maybe even flourish?

The present article is based on the observation that there exists a contemporary – and to all appearances quite voluminous – anti-masturbation literature written in Arabic.⁴ The respective Arabic literature, as well as a large number of videos, is mostly circulated on the Internet. It is precisely for this reason that Michel Foucault's remark came to my mind again some time ago. For it is tempting to state that this contemporary Arabic material likewise provokes a good deal of both 'fascination' and 'boredom.' It is 'boring' in the sense that it is harping on about the purported harmful effects of the practice (and often in a highly alarmist tone). But as holds true for the historical material to which Foucault refers, it seems premature to lay such contemporary Arabic texts aside unstudied all too quickly, because they actually constitute 'fascinating' material. As Lesley A. Hall has put it: 'The varying attitudes to this common sexual manifestation during a particular historical period in a particular society are worth consideration [...].'⁵ Central to this 'fascination', of course, is the question of *why* this literature flourishes and *how* particular people position themselves vis-à-vis the practice. What do they have to say about masturbation? What seems to be at stake when they are addressing the topic? Does the discourse of those who speak up against masturbation in these Arabic texts resemble the respective historical European discourse (i.e. what Foucault has termed the 'crusade against masturbation')? In the latter case, is this resemblance more than a mere coincidence? Are there maybe even traceable influences?

In the pages that follow I shall try and search for answers to the questions raised above. In essence, this requires (1) to take a cursory look at the contemporary Arabic discourse on masturbation. The first group of texts that shall be consulted is longer tracts against masturbation. The texts consulted for the present study are al-Ghumārī's *Al-Istiqṣā' li-adillat taḥrīm al-istimnā' aw al-āda as-sirriyya min an-nāḥiyatayn ad-dīniyya wa-ṣ-ṣiḥḥiyya* (see below) and *Tuḥfat aṣḥ-ṣhābb ar-rabbānī fī r-radd 'alā l-imām Muḥammad b. 'Alī aṣḥ-Shawkānī* by Abū 'Abdarrahmān Muqbil b. Hādī al-Wādī'ī. Both were published in print. Apart from them, a number of longer texts and videos specifically dedicated to *al-āda as-sirriyya* 'masturbation' are being circulated on the Internet. To begin,

⁴ It is essential to stress, however, that comparable contemporary material also exists elsewhere. Not in the least, the religious right in the 'West' is notoriously 'productive' in this respect.

⁵ Lesley A. Hall: 'Forbidden by God, Despised by Men: Masturbation, Medical Warnings, Moral Panic, and Manhood in Great Britain, 1850-1950', in: *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Special Issue, Part 2: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe (1992), pp. 365-387; p. 365.

there is an anonymous text termed *Baḥṭh* ‘an *mumārasat al-‘āda as-sirriyya*,⁶ the authorship of which somewhat cryptically is attributed to a *duktūrah nafsiyya* ‘(fem.) psychiatrist.’ This very same text is sometimes attributed to Muḥammad Aḥmad ar-Rifā‘ī.⁷ Exemplary mention also may be made of Muḥammad Fankhūr al-‘Abdalī’s text *Al-‘Āda as-sirriyya: mafhūmuhā wa-ḥukmuhā*, Muḥammad b. ‘Imrān’s *Al-ḥaqīqa al-djāliyya fī ḥurmat al-‘āda as-sirriyya* or Rāmī Khālid ‘Afdallāh al-Khaḍīr’s *Al-Intiṣār ‘alā l-‘āda as-sirriyya: wasā’il ‘amaliyya li-l-wiqāya wa-l-‘ilādī minhā*. A full tract is furthermore Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munadjjid’s *Al-‘Āda as-sayyi’a*. Another more extensive text in circulation is *Nuzhat al-albāb fī stimnā’ an-nisā’ wa-r-ridjāl*, authored by a so-called ‘Abū Taymiyya.⁸ In addition to such longer tracts there are countless smaller texts that broach the issue. They are found in newspapers, on websites dedicated to *tawba*, in a host of forums, in women’s magazines, on the websites of sexologists, in online *fatwās*, and so forth (i.e. basically they are found on sites dedicated to giving advice). It will be necessary (2) to compare this contemporary Arabic discourse on masturbation with its (historical) European (and American) counterpart and see if there are any resemblances or traceable influences – which forcefully seems to be case.⁹ This will require consulting the solid body of research into the historical stance(s) on masturbation in several European countries¹⁰ (whereby for the purposes of the present study I shall mainly draw

⁶ Accessible at www.z4ar.com/vb (accessed 2.5.2011); identical parts appear in videos; cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1CnMfimV_4&feature=related (accessed 16.5.2011).

⁷ For these authors cf. <http://www.acofps.com/vb/showthread.php?t=15462> (accessed 18/05/2014). This page that belongs to the *Akādimiyyat ‘ilm an-nafs* in Jeddah is interesting above all insofar as it informs about a preventive programme that seeks to deter schoolchildren from masturbation.

⁸ I wish to stress that (sometimes even large) parts of these texts are identical.

⁹ It is worthwhile to stress that more recent (i.e. not 19th-century) ‘Western’ material is being spread as well. A good example is found in an article published in the online edition of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Yawm as-sābi* in 2013 [cf. http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=916541&#.U5738o1_ty8 (accessed 16/06/2014)]. The article is entitled *Li-l-kibār faqaṭ...khamsat aḍrār li-l-‘āda as-sirriyya qad taṣīlu li-l-‘adjz al-djinsī*, and it somewhat cryptically refers to a ‘study conducted in 1978’ that obviously was cited somewhere on the bodybuilding website (!) *T Nation*. In fact, there are several questions about masturbation found in the forums of *T Nation*, which mainly seem to have to do with questions of whether masturbation affects one’s training, muscle gain, etc. Apart from *T Nation*, the article also refers to *Ask Men* magazine – hardly two beacons of critical inquiry.

¹⁰ The topic has been studied carefully, cf. e.g. Lesley A. Hall: ‘Forbidden by God, Despised by Men: Masturbation, Medical Warnings, Moral Panic, and Manhood in Great Britain, 1850-1950’, in: *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Special Issue, Part 2: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe (1992),

on Michel Foucault). (3) It will be essential to formulate a number of hypotheses as to why one is dealing with a seemingly booming literature here and as to who seems to be especially active in propagating certain ‘truths’ about masturbation. As has been said already, for many of the authors of these texts (and in particular the more ‘detailed’ ones) *the ‘issue’ of masturbation seems to serve as an occasion to broach the contemporary world – i.e. in reality they are talking about much more than just masturbation.* In fact, masturbation is being connected with several issues within the texts. Not the least of which is the general notion that the ‘times’ – in several respects – ‘have changed’ (to the worse) and that these changes lead to masturbation. Yet it may be asked already at this point

pp. 365-387; Alan Hunt: ‘The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain’, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1998), pp. 575-615; Robert H. MacDonald: ‘The Frightful Consequences of Onanism: Notes on the History of a Delusion’, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1967), pp. 423-431; Franz X. Eder: ‘Discourse and Sexual Desire: German Language Discourse on Masturbation in the Late Eighteenth Century’, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2004), pp. 428-445; Arthur N. Gilbert and Michael Barkun: ‘Disaster and Sexuality’, in: *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 17, No. 3, History and Sexuality (1981), pp. 288-299; Michael S. Patton: ‘Masturbation from Judaism to Victorianism’, in: *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 133-146; Michael Stolberg: ‘Self-Pollution, Moral Reform, and the Veneral Trade: Notes on the Sources and Historical Context of Onania (1716)’, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 9, No. ½ (2000), pp. 37-61; James Whorton: ‘The Solitary Vice: The Superstition that Masturbation Could Cause Mental Illness’, in: *Western Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 175 (2001), pp. 66-68; Greg Tuck: ‘Of Monsters, Masturbators and Markets: Autoerotic Desire, Sexual Exchange and the Cinematic Serial Killer’, in: Niall Scott (ed.): *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007; Leah Claire Allen: *Corporeal Imperialism: Textual Anti-Masturbation in the Eighteenth Century & National Negotiation: Toward Feminist Postnationalism in Theory and Practice*. Extended Essays Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Women’s Studies. Simon Fraser University, 2006; Diane Mason: *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008; Peter L. Allen: *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*. Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2000; Mabel Collins Donnelly: *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986; Marcia C. Inhorn: ‘Masturbation, Semen Collection and Men’s IVF Experiences: Anxieties in the Muslim World’, in: *Body & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2007), pp. 37-53; Franz X. Eder: ‘Diskurs und Sexualpädagogik: Der deutschsprachige Onanie-Diskurs des späten 18. Jahrhunderts’, in: *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (2003), pp. 719-735; Michael Stolberg: ‘The Crime of Onan and the Laws of Nature. Religious and Medical Discourses on Masturbation in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, in: *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (2003), pp. 701-717.

if some of this material about masturbation is not also, to borrow Hall's expression, '[e]xploiting a desire for information as much as prurient voyeurism.'¹¹ It is plausible, of course, that the frequent treatment of masturbation as a 'stately subject' (Mark Twain) creates a desire for knowledge, – and this certainly allows quite a few people to live rather well from dwelling upon the 'issue.' In fact, masturbation has been the topic of several Arabic talkshows¹² and is being dealt with in a large variety of media. In regard to the knowledge provided, it thereby often is both *moralising* and *pathologising*. And although not all of it does this to the same extent, and although not all of the texts share the alarmist tenor that seems to appear so often (in fact, some of them are pretty 'down-to-earth' and adjust the importance of the 'issue'), the proposition that masturbation is fundamentally wrong must cause considerable suffering. One only needs to look at the often really desperate cries for help that one finds on countless websites. At the same time it does not seem to be entirely unjustified to assume that an element of 'voyeurism' sometimes plays along with the desire for information. Maybe the following reader comment on Egyptian sexologist Heba Qotb's website contains its kernel of truth: 'Doctor (Heba Qotb), this site does more harm than it does help, because if it was not for this site, I wouldn't even have known that girls masturbate; I was so turned on (by reading your site) that I tried it and now I don't know how to stop. I urge you to stop being so explicit because this arouses our sexual desire [...].'¹³ How much 'voyeurism' seems to play into the issue is well illustrated by the fact that some feel compelled to disclaim expressly that the material which they divulge is intended to help voyeurism. Thus, for example, one video starts with the notification that '[t]he videos of the channel only contain *text* (*mawḍū'āt maqrū'a*), and only intend to educate and inform those who are married (*bi-hadaf at-tathqīf wa-l-ma'rifa li-l-mutazawwidīn*)' – indicating that the video-channel 'does not aspire to spread pornographic images and sexual excitation.'¹⁴

To put it differently, it goes without saying that this discourse on masturbation has more than one dimension; it cannot be pinned down easily. It will be the task of future research to explore these dimensions more fully, and is not something that aims to be achieved by the present study. This article, rather, is of an explorative nature and focuses upon a number of topics that seem to be particularly important with regard to this material. Finally, it should be emphasised that at least some people disagree completely with the notion that mastur-

¹¹ Cf. Hall *Forbidden by God*, p. 368. With this expression, Hall refers to the 'anatomical museums' in Victorian England.

¹² Cf. e.g. the TV-show by Heba Qotb which is accessible at e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGQf3xwyvms> (accessed 16/05/2014).

¹³ Cf. <http://www.hebakotb.net/Articles/12/may/9/271> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁴ Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjBvfYtXbo> (accessed 24/06/2014).

bation is a harmful practice and even ridicule that idea¹⁵, i.e. the discourse on the harmful effects of masturbation focused here *by no means* should be mistaken for a generally shared stance of the practice – this perspective makes it even more relevant to take a closer look at this anti-masturbation material.

‘The Secret Habit’ | *al-‘āda as-sirriyya*

In the Arabic texts studied, masturbation (both male and female¹⁶) is designated by several terms. The most frequent are *al-‘āda as-sirriyya* (‘the secret habit’), *al-istimnā* ‘masturbation’, *al-‘āda as-sayyi‘a* (‘the evil habit’), *al-‘āda al-ḥabīṭha* (‘the wicked habit’), *al-‘āda ash-shayṭāniyya* (‘the diabolic habit’) or *al-‘āda al-qabīḥa* (‘the vile habit’). With the exception of the neutral term *istimnā*, all of the terms reflect the fundamental assumption that masturbation is wrong – a *dhanb ‘aẓīm*.¹⁷ No wonder then that the issue ‘robs many of their sleep’ (*tuqīḍu maddja‘ahum; tu‘arriqu manāmahum*)¹⁸ and ‘provokes questions and grievances’ (*tuthīru tasā‘ulātihim wa-shakawātihim*);¹⁹ it is no wonder that the texts are teeming with the ‘sighs’ (*ḥasarāt*) of the ‘afflicted’, and that we meet with countless youth full of remorse (*nadam*) and pain (*alām*) who are veritable pictures of misery.

Most of the authors thereby take it for granted that their rejection of masturbation is commanded by the religious texts and that religion (both at the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’ level) is about to crumble if this ‘evil habit’ cannot be extirpated. At the same time, they seem to suggest that *more* and *truly practiced* religion would eliminate the practice (see below). It lies beyond the scope of the present article to detail and discuss the religious texts that are mobilised against masturbation.²⁰ In any case, several Qur’ānic verses are regularly cited

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. http://hayatblog.blogspot.com/2008/01/blog-post_21.html (accessed 21/04/2011).

¹⁶ Due to limited space, the present study primarily focuses upon *male* masturbation. I wish to stress, though, that female masturbation is a major issue because of the specific anxieties connected with it such as self-inflicted ‘loss of virginity’; cf. e.g. <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/health-counsels/8486/72950-2009-01-26%2014-02-35.html> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.66n.com/forums/showthread.php?t=76794> (accessed 17/05/2011).

¹⁸ Cf. *Baḥṭh*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Cf. *Baḥṭh*, p. 3.

²⁰ For studies that address the topic of masturbation in an Islamic context see e.g. Marcia Claire Inhorn: *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012; Murad Sayfuddin & Abdullah-R. Muhametov: *Love & Sex in Islam*. Publishing House Ansar 2004-2011; Johanna Pink: *Sunnitischer Tafsiṛ in der modernen islamischen Welt. Akademische Traditionen, Popularisierung und nationalstaatliche Interessen*. Leiden: Brill, 2011; Vardit Rispler-Chaim: *Islamic Medical Ethics in the Twentieth Century*. Leiden: Brill, 1993; Farideh Akashe-Böhme: *Sexualität und Körperpraxis*

(Q 23:5-7 and Q 24:30),²¹ sometimes with the note, though, that the question of how to categorise and judge masturbation is controversial even within Islamic jurisprudence.²²

The Harmful Effects of Masturbation

For most texts masturbation is more than ‘just wrong.’ Rather it is said to be highly *detrimental* and *deleterious* at a variety of levels, and implicitly or explicitly the texts claim that *this* is the reason²³ why religion condemns the practice. (This is surprising, because it seems that masturbation generally is not being pathologised in the older literature, although this question cannot be investigated here with due care).²⁴ As to the harmful character of masturbation, it is said to inflict damages on the body, the psyche, religion, and society at large. Here are a few examples apart from the bodily harmful effects that the practice is claimed to inflict (and to which we will turn in a moment): Masturbation threatens to destroy matrimonial sex life, because both men and women may find *more* pleasure in masturbation²⁵ or cling to fantasies²⁶ of seductive sexual partners who cannot be found in real life. This then in turn may lead to divorce.²⁷ People neglect their familial duties and responsibilities, because their craving to mas-

im Islam. Frankfurt am Main: Brandes + Aspel, 2006; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & John Esposito (eds.): *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1998; Scott Alan Kugle: *Homosexuality and Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2010.

²¹ Cf. e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpMVjUXuSoc> (accessed 09/06/2014); The issue also is addressed clearly in a series of articles dedicated to masturbation and published on *tabib-web.eu*: http://www.tabib-web.eu/article_details.php?catid=96&thesid=2491&catid=96&numjosor=1 (accessed 17/05/2014).

²² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auNU0xRWMfY> (accessed 09/06/2014).

²³ It is essential to point to the existence of works that explicitly deny that masturbation is forbidden by the religious texts and stand up firmly against a discourse that extends the alleged harmful effects of the practice. In particular I wish to mention Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Khālīdī’s *Kashf al-ḥaqīqa al-khafiyya fī djawāz al-‘āda as-sirriyya* which is accessible e.g. at: <http://www.buraydh.com/forum/showthread.php?t=112229> (accessed 09/07/ 2014).

²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya in one instance suggests that excessive masturbation might be harmful, but this statement is made in a highly specific context; cf. Ibn Taymiyya *Maḡmū‘ al-fatāwā*, Vol. 25, pp. 250-251. Generally speaking he does not seem to hold that the practice is harmful; cf. also Lorenz Matthias Nigst: *Legitime Nähe: Ibn Taymīyas theoretisches Konstrukt von den awliyā‘ Allāh*. Dissertation, Wien 2011; pp. 57-58 (fn. 210).

²⁵ Cf. e.g. <http://www.twbh.com/index.php/site/article/read2944/> (accessed 18/05/2014) cf. also *Baḥth*, p. 8.

²⁶ Cf. e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmSOjR3uaZQ> (accessed 16/06/2014).

²⁷ Cf. al-Khaḍīr *Intiṣār*, p. 14.

turbate outweighs everything else. The author of the *Intiṣār* even suggests that some devoted masturbators ‘travel abroad a lot’ (*fa-qad tadjīduhū kathīr as-safar li-l-khāridj*) to find an adequate atmosphere to indulge in their secret habit.²⁸ Students are said to be distracted resulting in their scholarly performance changing for the worse.²⁹ People allegedly feel contemptible, weak, and depressed.³⁰ One reads of people who are said to be ‘weak-willed’ and ‘incapable of making decisions’ because of masturbation (cf. *ḍuʿf al-irāda wa-ʿadam al-qudra ʿalā ittikhādh al-qarār*³¹). It is moreover said to foster what in essence could be termed ‘asocial behaviour’ (cf. the terms *al-istikfāʿ adh-dhātī* or *al-ishbāʿ adh-dhātī*³²) – and so forth. Although the present article does not allow to pursue this any further, it should be stated that the *psychological* damage which masturbation is claimed to cause often seems to bolster the notion that the practice is ‘harmful’ after all, even if one distances oneself from the purported and more drastic *physical* harmful effects (see below) – or feels compelled to do so. (If the latter were true, the vast majority of people in fact would be physical ‘wrecks’). Needless to say, a moralizing discourse can be based upon psychological arguments as well.³³

Now apart from such ‘psychological’ or ‘social’ problems, it is claimed that masturbation ‘brings about diseases.’³⁴ There is a certain spectrum of opinion as to how harmful the practice actually is. Yet, there still remains the fact that literally a myriad of texts is at work firing off most terrifying bits of ‘information’³⁵ about the ‘truth’ of this ‘secret and evil practice’ and the dreadful consequences it is almost certainly going to have. In fact, to some the effects of masturbation are so devastating that it amounts to nothing less but ‘a slow suicide’ (*intiḥār bi-buṭ*³⁶), and according to some the practice may cause ‘paralysis or death’ (*ash-*

²⁸ Cf. al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 16.

²⁹ Cf. al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, pp. 15-16.

³⁰ Cf. e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBoYkq7r29c> (accessed 09/06/2014). As to masturbation as the cause of sadness or anxiety, Ghumārī points to a respective statement by Dāwūd al-Anṭākī (16th century AD): ‘yūriṭhu ghamman fī ṣ-ṣadr’; cf. *Ghumārī Istiqṣāʿ*, p. 42.

³¹ Cf. ‘Abdalī *Al-ʿĀda as-sirriyya*, p. 14.

³² Cf. <http://www.66n.com/forums/showthread.php?t=76794> (accessed 17.5.2011).

³³ Cf. <http://www.hebakotb.net/Articles/12/may/9/271> (accessed 18/05/2014).

³⁴ Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpNE6gjMq-0&feature=related> (accessed 16/05/2011).

³⁵ I have already mentioned the articles on *tabib-web.eu*. The authors of *tabib-web* are critical of the incorrect information about masturbation that is spread by countless people. They have directed several open letters to central figures in this respect.

³⁶ Cf. *Baḥṭh*, p. 3. It is worth mentioning that some of the documents are a veritable jumble of conflicting assertions in this respect and trumpet contradictions of a kind that one would not consider possible. Thus, for example, the *Baḥṭh* states at one point that ‘[f]rom a purely medical perspective, there are no dangers at all that stem from

shalal aw al-mawt).³⁷ Within many of the texts, rather gloomy processions of the more or less abysmal ills of masturbation are legion. These ills range from extreme and pathological thinness (*an-nahāfa al-maraḍiyya*)³⁸, shortness of breath to the trembling (*irti 'āsh*) of the legs, and thereby 'especially the left leg' (*'alā al-akhaṣṣ as-sāq al-yusrā*).³⁹ The detrimental consequences of masturbation furthermore are said to be clearly visible on the genitals. This is described in some detail: 'the scrotum is loose and extended' (*aṣ-ṣafan yakūnu rakhwan wa-mumtaddan*) and 'the glans loses its natural colour and becomes yellowish' (*al-ḥashafa tafqidu lawnahā aṭ-ṭabīṭ wa-taghdū ṣafrā*)⁴⁰; masturbation may stop the growth of the reproductive organs, and specifically the growth of the 'testicles and the urethra'⁴¹; it is claimed to lead to a small penis.⁴² The practice furthermore is said to 'make the sperm of a man thin' (*minā ar-radjul yaṣīru bi-hādhihī l-'amaliyya raqīqan*), from which in turn results a 'weak embryo (*djanīn ḍa'if*)'.⁴³ If this man is able to beget children at all, sometimes the children of a man who practices masturbation are said to be 'weak' and to 'be ill frequently'.⁴⁴ Masturbation furthermore is claimed to cause impotence, a weak erection, premature ejaculation, a hurting and bent back⁴⁵, problems with the spine, aching joints and knees, tremor and debility of sight; dark circles around the eyes⁴⁶; it is said to weaken the nervous system and the muscles; it allegedly affects the brain⁴⁷ and leads to mental backwardness⁴⁸ – sometimes to the extent

masturbation' (*min an-nāhiya aṭ-ṭibbiyya laysat hunāk makhāṭir ṣiḥiyya min al-mumārāsa 'alā al-iṭlāq*). On the other hand, the harmful effects of masturbation are extended in great detail and rather drastically. In fact, it remains a mystery how something that is said not to be harmful is supposed to be a 'slow suicide.'

³⁷ Cf. <http://ejabat.google.com/ejabat/thread?tid=063fd5421ebbe3b1> (accessed 16/06/2014).

³⁸ Cf. e.g. *Baḥth*, p. 14. see also: 'A person who masturbates becomes weak and thin [...].' cf. <http://www.askimam.org/fatwa/fatwa.php?askid=e8ad71804b1e9eca1917c9dce3d62afa> (accessed 16.5.2011).

³⁹ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Al-Ghumārī Istiqṣā'*, p. 41.

⁴² Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 5.

⁴³ Cf. *Munadjjid Al-'Āda as-sayyi'a*, p. 11; *al-Ghumārī Istiqṣā'*, p. 41. These arguments appear in a number of videos as well; cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1CnMfimV_4&feature=related (accessed 16/05/2011); cf. also Hall 'Forbidden by God', pp. 372-373.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 3; cf. also http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnMt_FaF-ps (accessed 09/06/2014).

⁴⁵ Cf. *al-Ghumārī Istiqṣā'*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 5; cf. also <http://www.alrakoba.net/articles-action-show-id-754.htm> (accessed 18/05/2014).

⁴⁷ Cf. also *Baḥth*, p. 12.

that it causes insanity⁴⁹; it may cause homosexuality⁵⁰; it may cause ‘bad breath’ (*rā’iḥa karītha bi-l-fam*)⁵¹ – and so forth. Particularly striking and downright silly ‘evidence’ for the drastical physical damage purportedly caused by masturbation is ‘shown’ in a video.⁵² It consists in two pictures of bow-legs (cf. figure 1) whereby the bow-legs shown are more pronounced in the second picture. The video informs us that the first picture shows the legs of someone ‘who is close to addiction to masturbation’ whereas the second one shows the legs of someone who has already fallen victim to a ‘full addiction’ (and maybe it is not a coincidence that a non-*mustaqīm* lifestyle results in non-*mustaqīm* legs; see below).



This list of the afflictions caused by masturbation could be extended easily.⁵³ It is worthwhile mentioning that the claim that masturbation ‘weakens the penis’ (*yud’ifu ‘udw at-tanāsul*) is reason enough for a more specific concern. As the practice purportedly threatens the masturbator with a penis that is doomed to remain partially or fully *flaccid*, the masturbator becomes more ‘womanish because he loses the most important distinctive mark of the manhood with which God has set men above women’ (*bi-ḥaythu yaṣīru fā’iluhū ašbah bi-l-mar’a li-*

⁴⁸ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Cf. al-*Ghumārī Istiqṣā’*, p. 41; al-*Khaḍīr Intiṣār*, pp. 10-11; *Baḥth*, p. 5. For the link between insanity and masturbation cf. also Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 313; cf. also Hall ‘*Forbidden by God*’, p. 365; MacDonald ‘*Frightful Consequences*’.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Cf. <http://ejabat.google.com/ejabat/thread?tid=063fd5421ebbe3b1> (accessed 16/06/2014).

⁵² Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Whpj1PJd8> (accessed 30/05/2014).

⁵³ Cf. Al-*Khaḍīr Intiṣār*, p. 7; see also Munajjidjid *Al-‘Āda as-sayyi’a*, p. 11. These harmful effects are repeated on countless websites, cf. e.g. <http://www.forsan.haq.com/showthread.php?t=86206> (accessed 30/05/2014).

*faqdihi ahamm mumayyizāt ar-rudjūla allatī faḍḍala llāhu bihā r-radjul ‘alā l-mar’a).*⁵⁴

Resemblances: Comparative Evidence

This terrifying cohort of harmful effects is *all but an unknown but essentially seems to reproduce the pathologising discourse on the dangers of masturbation that appears in the anti-masturbation literature that flourished in 18th and 19th century Europe*. To be more precise, what *some* of these contemporary Arabic texts seem to revive – in a most anachronistic way – is nothing else but what Michel Foucault has termed the *fiction of total disease* spread out in respective European literature.⁵⁵ Like their European counterparts the contemporary Arabic texts tend to give a most ‘fabulous description of some polymorphous, absolute, and relentless disease’⁵⁶; like them they point in the direction of a disease that seems to concentrate (a substantial part of) the symptoms of any imaginable disease.⁵⁷ Foucault pointed to the centrality of the *emaciated body* of the young masturbator in this context – a body in which the signs of this total disease are concentrated.⁵⁸ Illustrative of this notion of total physical decline is the anonymous so-called *Livre sans titre* with its several drawings of a feeble and haggard young boy in full decline, which was published in Paris in 1830.⁵⁹ Likewise, several Arabic texts consulted for this investigation harp on about the *total exhaustion* caused by masturbation. Thus, the *Intiṣār* speaks of an *inhāk kāmīl li-quwā al-djism* ‘a total exhaustion of the forces of the body.’⁶⁰ That some of the contemporary propagators of this scientific fairy-tale are willing to go to extremes is well illustrated by the fact that they are not shy of underlying their respective videos with images of an anorectic man. (It has already been stated that pathological thinness (*an-nahāfa al-marādīyya*) figures among the listed harmful effects of the practice; see above).⁶¹ The following account clearly points in this direction: ‘I am a young boy nineteen years of age. Now, I am weighing forty eight kg. For six years, I assiduously have been practicing masturbation. I have no appetite, and I’ve become so thin that the bones of my face have begun to stand out (*barazat ‘izām wadjihī*) and people have become afraid of me. I don’t feel any taste for life (*lā ash‘ur li-l-ḥayāt bi-t-ṭa‘m*). I’ve lost all

⁵⁴ Cf. al-Wādi’ī *Tuhfat ash-shābb*, p. 65; for this particular point cf. also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1PxZzJq4c4&feature=related> (accessed 16/05/2011).

⁵⁵ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 310.

⁵⁶ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 310.

⁵⁷ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, pp. 310-311.

⁵⁸ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, pp. 310-311.

⁵⁹ For this book see Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 306.

⁶⁰ Cf. Al-Khaḍīr *Intiṣār*, p. 7; cf. also *Baḥth*, p. 12.

⁶¹ Cf. e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwVx0OYTzA0> (accessed 16/05/2011).

hope and I've tried to kill myself more than once. How am I supposed to rescue myself?!'⁶² A heartbreaking tableau of the total disease into which masturbation throws what formerly had been blooming youth is also painted in al-Munadjjid's *Āda as-sayyi'a*: 'While those youth who are afflicted [by masturbation] once used to be in the possession of a strong body (*qawī al-a'dā*) and overflowing with energy (*djamm an-nashāt*), of blazing intelligence and youth (*yash' alu dhakā'an wa-futuwwatan*) and of fiery enthusiasm and vigor (*yaltahibu ḥamāsan wa-quwwatan*), with the bloom of youth (*naḍrat aṣh-shabāb*) flowing through their faces and the blood of life boiling in their veins – now that this practice [i.e. masturbation] has ruined them (*anhakahū dhālika l-fi'l*) you see them with their bodies grown weak (*da'if al-a'dā*) and without energy (*fāqid an-nashāt*); you see how their brightness has turned into stupidity (*istahāla dhakā'uhū ilā ghabāwa wa-afan*), their enthusiasm and strength into weakness and feebleness (*inqalaba ḥamāsuhū wa-quwwatuhū ilā ḍu'f wa-wahan*) and how the bloom [of their faces] has been replaced by a paleness that announces that an incurable disease has descended (*ṣārat naḍratuhū ṣufratan tundhiru bi-hulūl 'ayā*)⁶³; how the heat of their blood has gone down proportionately with the amount of semen they have spilled (*bi-nisbat mā akhrajā min al-mā*)⁶⁴ and how they have joined the ranks of the decrepit and senile although they are still in the age of youth [...]' (*iltahaqa bi-sh-shuyūkh al-harāmā wa-huwa lā yazālu ba'd fi sinn aṣh-shabāb*).⁶⁵ The exhaustion purportedly caused by masturbation furthermore is well illustrated by the pretension that 'a single ejaculation equals the exertion of someone who runs uninterruptedly for several kilometres' (*inna marrat qaḍhf wāḥida tu'ādilu madjhūd man rakāḍa rakḍan muwāṣilan limasāfat 'iddat kīlūmitrāt*).⁶⁶ No wonder then that the unfortunate masturbators have a permanent craving for sleep to make up for the exertion caused by their 'secret habit' (*li-ta'wīḍ madjhūdhā*)⁶⁷ – and thus 'waste away their lives' with masturbating on the one hand and compensating for the inevitable exertion that

⁶² *Baḥth*, p. 14; for a conspicuously similar statement cf. al-Wādī'ī *Tuḥfat aṣh-shābb*, pp. 60-61.

⁶³ Al-Munadjjid summarises al-Ghumārī here (see below). Significantly, al-Ghumārī does not write about an 'incurable disease,' but rather more specifically about sull 'consumption' which further corroborates the strong influence of the European literature on the topic; for the causal link established between masturbation and consumption, see Foucault *Die Anormalen*, pp. 312-313.

⁶⁴ For the alleged danger of the 'waste of the vital spermatic fluid' in the literature of Victorian England cf. Hall *Forbidden by God*, p. 367.

⁶⁵ Munadjjid *Al-Āda as-sayyi'a*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Cf. al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 7. Sometimes the advice is given to actually run *one* kilometre to see the results; cf. www.facebook.com/notes/i-am-a-muslim-10151872370635341 (accessed 16/06/2014).

⁶⁷ Cf. al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 9.

results from masturbation on the other.⁶⁸ Also illustrative of the spectacularly energy-sapping character of masturbation are several equations such as ‘masturbating *once* equals sleeping with a woman *twelve times*’ (*inna fi’l al-‘āda as-sirriyya marra yusāwī ḍjimā’ imra’a 12 marra*).⁶⁹

It is worthwhile underlining at this point that Michel Foucault suggested that apart from the *fiction of a total disease* – which in the 18th and 19th century mostly seems to appear in tracts specifically targeting masturbation –, the practice also figures prominently among the causes of several diseases in medical texts which are *not* explicitly concerned with masturbation.⁷⁰ The above overview allows to state that within this Arabic material, both the fiction of a total disease and the notion that masturbation is the cause of a whole variety of diseases seem to be playing a role. In any case, it is striking to learn that masturbation may have such *opposing effects* as the abnormal growth of the sexual organs and the stop of their growth and even their shrinkage (cf. *wa-qad tanmū l-a‘dā’ at-tanāsuliyya ladā murtakib al-‘āda as-sirriyya bi-shakl ḡhayr ma’lūf [...] wa-qad yaḥduthu l-‘aks fa-yaqifu numuww al-‘uḍw wa-tankamiṣhu l-khuṣyatān*).⁷¹

Influences

Now if it seems undeniable against the backdrop of what has been said thus far that this material is immersed in notions that belong to the 18th and 19th century European discourse on masturbation, the question arises *how then did this material actually find its way into the Arabic texts?* Is it possible to identify traceable remnants? Although it is difficult and maybe impossible to give a definite answer to this question, it seems that Abū l-Faḍl Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. aṣ-Ṣiddīq al-Ḡhumārī’s (1910-1993) tract *Al-Istiḡṣā’ li-adillat taḥrīm al-istimnā’ aw al-‘āda as-sirriyya min an-nāḥiyatayn ad-dīniyya wa-ṣ-ṣiḥḥiyya* should be considered an important gateway in this respect. Al-Ḡhumārī refers explicitly to H. Fournier’s *De l’onanisme*⁷² (cf. ‘*wa-man arāda t-tafṣīl fa-l-yarḍji ilā l-kutub allatī stakḥlaṣnā minhā mā dhakarnāhu wa-hiya Kitāb al-Istimnā’ ta’līf ad-dukṭūr H. Fournier etc.*’).⁷³ This hint by al-Ḡhumārī to have drawn (among other works) from Fournier’s *De l’onanisme* seems to provide a very likely explanation for the influx of material that belongs to the European ‘crusade’

⁶⁸ Cf. al-Kḥaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Whpj1PJd8> (accessed 30/05/2014); at 2:16 min.

⁷⁰ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 312.

⁷¹ Cf. *Baḥṭh*, p. 6.

⁷² Cf. H. Fournier: *De l’onanisme: causes, dangers et inconvénients pour les individus, la famille et la société. Remèdes*. Paris: J.B. Baillièrre et fils, 1883.

⁷³ Cf. al-Ḡhumārī: *Al-Istiḡṣā’ li-adillat taḥrīm al-istimnā’ aw al-‘āda as-sirriyya min an-nāḥiyatayn ad-dīniyya wa-ṣ-ṣiḥḥiyya*. Al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Qāhira, s. a.; p. 42.

against masturbation into the Arabic anti-masturbation discourse. This is corroborated further by al-Ghumārī's statement that his tract is the first epistle that was written on the topic after As-Sayyid Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī's (1732-1790 AD) *Al-Qawl al-asadd fī ḥukm al-istimnā' bi-l-yad* (which seems to be lost).⁷⁴ This alone would make a certain influence of his tract more than plausible. That al-Ghumārī's *Istiqṣā'* appears to be an important connection in this respect furthermore is suggested by the fact that several texts – explicitly or implicitly – quote entire passages from it.⁷⁵ Arguably, the most important of these is *Tuḥfat aṣh-shābb ar-rabbānī fī r-radd 'alā l-imām Muḥammad b. 'Alī aṣh-Shawkānī* by Abū 'Abdarrahmān Muqbil b. Hādī al-Wādī'ī, in which the pages that al-Ghumārī dedicated to the 'dangers' of masturbation are quoted in full length and complemented by extensive additional material.⁷⁶ I am not suggesting that Ghumārī's tract should be regarded as the *only* gateway for the historical European discourse on masturbation and that H. Fournier's *De l'onanisme* is the *only* European source that informs the contemporary Arabic material. Given the massive body of European texts on the topic which spans several languages, other influences cannot be ruled out. But this question lies beyond the scope of this study (and it will also be important to consider possible contemporary influences).⁷⁷ In any case, it remains that an important share of the texts consulted for the present study maintains intertextual relations with Ghumārī's *Istiqṣā'*.

One rather striking aspect of the more alarmist Arabic anti-masturbation discourse is that – to all appearances – many authors do not really seem to be aware that they are reproducing arguments that originate from the historical European

⁷⁴ Cf. Ghumārī *Istiqṣā'*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Cf. e.g. <http://www.66n.com/forums/showthread.php?t=76794> (accessed 21/04/2011). Explicit mention of al-Ghumārī is also made in Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid's *Al-Āda as-sayyi'a*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Cf. Al-Wādī'ī *Tuḥfat aṣh-shābb*, pp. 65 ff. It is important to stress at this point that regardless of obviously having served as a gateway for the European anti-masturbation literature, al-Ghumārī's *Istiqṣā'* is of a profoundly different nature than the bulk of the more recent Arabic tracts against masturbation. In the first place, it uses the terminology and methods of Islamic jurisprudence. The way it argues in this respect by its very nature does not allow for hastily picking a few arguments; second, it insists that masturbation does not befit a 'true man'; it is way too degrading and a *dishonourable* practice (cf. Ghumārī *Istiqṣā'*, pp. 8-9). It seems that this argument does not play a very significant role in the more recent tracts that obviously are more obsessed with the alleged *physical* harmful effects of the practice. For an illusion to *murū'a* in the context of masturbation cf. e.g. 'Abdalī *Al-Āda as-sirriyya*, p. 14. For a link of 'masturbation' with 'unmanliness' cf. Hall *Forbidden by God*, p. 367.

⁷⁷ A case in point is the more recent topic of 'sex addiction.'

‘crusade’ against masturbation.⁷⁸ Thus al-Wādi‘ī scolds medical practitioners who deny that masturbation causes diseases: ‘Whoever denies these diseases [he is referring to the list of diseases that he has extended on the previous pages] caused by masturbation [...] has to be ranked among the ignorant physicians (*djahalat al-aṭibbā*) and merely imitates his masters from America and Europe [...] who live in a society that could not be more depraved, obscene and shameless, and where they have become like beasts and ride each other in the streets’ (*aṣbahū ka-l-bahā'im wa-yarkabu ba'dhum ba'dan fī sh-shawāri*).⁷⁹ It is at least surprising that texts that often specifically are directed against the ‘West’ in fact contribute to hammering anachronistic ‘Western’ notions into their readers’ minds. But do the authors really not know about the European origin of their arguments? Maybe their insistence on the more dramatic harmful effects of the practice finds its explanation in the fact that this rather nightmarish and questionable contemporary Arabic discourse actually is *not at all* just about masturbation. Maybe their insistence is of eminent strategical benefit?

Masturbation as the Ill of the Present Age

A conspicuous feature of these Arabic texts about masturbation is that many of them contain a ‘diagnosis’ of what they consider to be the ills of the present, and *this* makes them interesting. As I have suggested elsewhere,⁸⁰ (an important share of) the discourse on ‘masturbation’ seems to fit neatly within the propositions of a discourse that essentially addresses social-cultural transformations and influences and that often corresponds to a struggle to enforce or defend a particular vision of society (and the authority of those who define it). Within this discourse, the term *fiṭra* (‘primordial nature’), which includes the notion that ‘Islam’ is the inborn state of humankind, seems to epitomise those things that allegedly must not change in order to prevent an ‘Islamic identity’ from collapsing.⁸¹ Thus it hardly seems to be a coincidence that many of the texts about masturbation are alarmed about the present times insofar as these are full of *fitan* ‘temptations’ or ‘trials’ (cf. e.g. *zamān takṭuru fīhi l-ḥitan*⁸²; *fī hādihā z-zamān*

⁷⁸ Of course, some people are well aware of this fact. For a hint at *Simon-Auguste Tissot* see e.g. a series of articles by Khālid Muntaṣir published under the title of *At-Ta'rīkh as-sirri li-l-āda as-sirriyya*; cf. <http://www.elaph.com/elaphweb/ElaphWeb/Health/2005/7/79632.htm> (accessed 24/06/2014).

⁷⁹ Al-Wādi‘ī *Tuḥfat aṣh-shābb*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ For details cf. Lorenz M. Nigst: ‘Become What You Are: *Fiṭra* and the Discourse of Obstructive Social-Cultural Transformations’, in: *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 22, Nr. 2 (2013), pp. 165-186; see also the stress on *tarbiya islāmiyya* ‘Islamic education’; cf. e.g. Munadījid *Al-Āda as-sayyi'a*, p. 2.

⁸¹ Cf. Nigst ‘*Become What You Are*’, p. 183.

⁸² Al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 12.

alladhī ‘*azumat fīhi l-fitna*’⁸³). Apparently, some are worried that an entire order is endangered, and they seem to hold that society has disintegrated (cf. the term *al-mudjtama* ‘*al-mutafassikh*’).⁸⁴ Their proposition seems to be that ‘religion’ is far too weak and that several (social) ills – among them masturbation – would disappear automatically if this were not the case. As a matter of fact, if it comes to the question of how to heal (the ‘addiction’ to) masturbation or guard oneself against this ‘repulsive’ practice, considerations of *īmān* [belief] and ritual occupy a prominent place.⁸⁵ Many texts seem to suggest that if masturbation is caused implicitly by lack or weakness of belief, it accordingly can be eliminated through fortifying belief, i.e. by reinstating the ritual exigencies of belief.⁸⁶ Generally speaking, they are immersed in what might be termed a ‘territorial logic,’ which is in line with the assumption that the boundaries have become way too diluted and that too many foreign influences are ‘wreaking havoc.’ It fits this observation that (historical) *military* terms such as *thaghr* (pl. *thughūr*) ‘outpost’ or ‘stronghold’ occur in the texts.⁸⁷ It is through these outposts that destructive behaviour and thoughts may start their onslaught on ‘Muslim society’, seeping into it like ‘poison.’⁸⁸ This ‘territorial logic’ does not only extend to entities such as national states or concepts such as the ‘Muslim world’, but *each and every single body* sometimes is declared to be one of ‘Islam’s *thughūr*’ ‘outposts’ or ‘strongholds.’⁸⁹ It is plausible that *sensory organs* such as the ear or the eye figure among the ‘strongholds’ or ‘outposts’ in the context of masturbation, because through them things ‘dangerous’ and ‘impure’ may enter the individual body and reduce to rubble a virtuous religious life (i.e. a particular vision of what a virtuous religious life consists in).⁹⁰ Some suggest that Satan himself enters through these ‘outposts.’⁹¹ The notion of *purity* plays a cardinal role here, and the texts (implicitly or explicitly) emphasise that bodies fallen victim to masturbation were not kept pure (through ritual and by means of clinging to the

⁸³ <http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/binbulihed/f/124.htm> (accessed 30/05/21014).

⁸⁴ Cf. Munadjjid *Al-‘Āda as-sayyi’*a, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Cf. Nigst ‘*Become What You Are*’, pp. 175-176.

⁸⁶ Cf. Nigst ‘*Become What You Are*’, p. 175.

⁸⁷ Cf. <http://www.ruowaa.com/vb3/showthread.php?p=145775> (accessed 02/2/2011).

⁸⁸ Cf. Nigst ‘*Become What You Are*’, pp. 175-176.

⁸⁹ Cf. <http://www.ruowaa.com/vb3/showthread.php?p=145775> (accessed 02/02/2011).

⁹⁰ Cf. <http://www.thawimezaan.com/vb/showpost.php?p=3833&postcount=12> (accessed 15/04/012).

⁹¹ For details cf. <http://www.noo-problems.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-77839.html> (accessed 11/05/2011); cf. also e.g. https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=175967145923852&story_fbid=204928806361019 (accessed 14/07/2014). It lies beyond the scope of the present article to study whether such contemporary references to *thughūr* (implicitly) refer to Ibn Qayyim al-Djawiyya’s work *Ad-Dā’ wa-d-dawā*. Cf. Ibn Qayyim al-Djawiyya: *Ad-Dā’ wa-d-dawā*. Ed. Muḥammad Adjmal al-Iṣlāḥī. Makka: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 1429 A.H.; pp. 229 ff.

commands of religion). The ‘outposts’ were not defended with sufficient strength.

Analytically speaking, I deem it essential to differentiate between two things at this point. On the one hand, the texts are explicit that having sexual feelings and cravings forms part of human nature (cf. the term *gharīza*).⁹² I shall come back to that point further below. According to the texts, this *gharīza* (‘natural impulse’ or ‘instinct’) must be considered an ‘internal factor’ that has its own force that cannot be done away with, but most likely also produces its effects in alliance with ‘external factors.’ As is stated in a rather down-to-earth text: ‘Your sexual desire is provoked (*dawā’ī ash-shahwa al-djinsiyya*) both from your inside because it is a deeply engrained natural impulse (*gharīza ašīla*), and from the outside through exposure to everything that is able to make you think about it. This is of utmost importance when it comes to clarifying the problem, because masturbation is not just connected with external factors in the sense that if you avoid them you will be able to refrain from masturbating; that is not true, because masturbation is connected with an inner instinct that pushes you towards satisfying it – and you resort to external stimulants (*al-muthīrāt al-khāridjiyya*) to achieve that.’⁹³ On the other hand, however, the texts emphasise that this part of human nature needs to be – and can be – directed into ‘appropriate channels’ and has to be dealt with adequately. Taken together, *both aspects implicitly contain the question of how society should look like*. The authors of many of these texts are convinced that ‘Islam’⁹⁴ is the appropriate answer in this respect, that is, when they broach the topic of ‘masturbation’ and the ‘natural sexual impulses’, they *effectively propagate their particular understanding of an ‘Islamic society.’ This implies that their discourse on masturbation equally is a discourse on anything that and anyone who (objectively or subjectively) does not subscribe to their vision of an ‘Islamic society’*; their convictions of how people should be living their lives. That the authors frequently speak up against the influx of ‘Western’ ideas, policies, and (cultural) products in this respect should not obscure the fact that they are really targeting (potential) socio-cultural changes *within* their societies.

It is important to turn to the topic of ‘natural sexual impulses’ in this context. If anything, many of the analysed texts are engrossed in an entire *rhetoric of sexual arousal*. Thus, we read about the ‘agitation of lust’ (cf. formulations such as *thawarān ash-shahwa*⁹⁵; *tahyīdj ash-shahwa*⁹⁶; *isti’ār ash-shahwa*⁹⁷; *ithārat*

⁹² Cf. e.g. <http://www.saaaid.net/rasael/371.htm> (accessed 31/05/2014).

⁹³ Cf. <http://www.saaaid.net/rasael/371.htm> (accessed 31/05/2014).

⁹⁴ I wish to stress, though, that the Arabic material about masturbation is not entirely ‘Islamic’; cf. e.g. http://st-takla.org/FAQ-Questions-VS-Answers/02-Questions-Related-to-Youth-and-Family__Al-Shabab-Wal-Osra/004-Whats-wrong-with-masturbation.html (accessed 18/05/2014).

⁹⁵ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 13.

*ash-shahwa*⁹⁸; *tahrīk ash-shahwa*⁹⁹); one ‘falls into lust’ (*waqa ‘fī sh-shahwa*); there is an ‘outburst of the instincts’ (*thawra gharīziyya*)¹⁰⁰; we read that ‘lust and passion lead (us) by the halter’ (*ash-shahwa wa-l-hawā taqūdān*).¹⁰¹ Such language suggests that some sort of *permanent war* needs to be waged against a lust that can be agitated that easily. The latter needs to be ‘fought’ (cf. *muḥārabat ash-shahwa*),¹⁰² ‘resisted’ (cf. *muqāwama*)¹⁰³ and its fire ‘extinguished’ (cf. *ikhmād thawarān ash-shahwa*)¹⁰⁴; it needs to be defeated (cf. *intiṣār*).¹⁰⁵ Yet, people always run the risk of being ‘overcome’ by it (cf. *ash-shahwa tataghallabu ‘alayk*)¹⁰⁶. No wonder then that masturbation is ‘in the air’, so to say. Accordingly, the texts are proposing an entire panoply of remedies. The most frequently mention consists of *ghaḍḍ al-baṣar* the ‘lowering of the gaze’ and of *ḥifẓ al-furūdj* ‘guarding the private parts’ (cf. the Qur’ānic verses mentioned further above). *Marriage* (i.e. lawful sexual intercourse) frequently is stated to be the central means to achieve both them, and thus to avert masturbation.¹⁰⁷ But many others things are brought up as well: wearing an attire that

⁹⁶ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 29.

⁹⁸ Cf. *‘Imrān Al-Ḥaqīqa al-djāliyya*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Khādir Intiṣār*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 21.

¹⁰² Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Khādir Intiṣār*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. <http://www.twbh.com/index.php/site/article/read2749/> (accessed 30/05/2014)

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Khādir Intiṣār*, p. 7; http://www.twbh.com/index.php/site/consult/consult_1042/ (accessed 30/05/2014).

¹⁰⁷ As an additional remark, it may be mentioned that *some* obviously are willing to propose more drastic provisions in order to achieve the ‘lowering of the gaze’, which so often is mentioned in the context of masturbation. (The advice, at least in one source, is attributed to Muḥammad al-‘Arīfī): ‘He who wants to lower his gaze must think of what is stinking and disgusting about a girl (*‘alayhi an yatadhakkara manātin al-fatāt*), i.e. he must think of her excrements and snot (*‘alayhi an yatadhakkara ghā’iṭahā wa-mukhāṭahā*), and he must imagine her as infected with smallpox or AIDS, and (he must also think of) menstruation and childbirth [...].’ The respective lists may vary – sometimes ‘urine’ (*bawl*), or the ‘smell of sweat’ (*rā’iḥat ‘araq*) or ‘bad breath’ (*rā’iḥat fam*) are mentioned; Cf. <http://www.noqat.org/vb/archive/index.php/t-1923.html>; cf. also *‘Imrān Al-ḥaqīqa al-djāliyya*, p. 5. Stench as a ‘device’ for fighting carnal appetites is well known from other traditions as well. For example, one could point to monastic literature and the desert fathers of the Egyptian desert: ‘A monk dipped his cloak into the putrefying flesh of a dead woman, so that the smell might banish thoughts about her; a dutiful daughter repelled the advances of a young monk by warning him that he could not imagine the strange and terrible stench of a menstruating woman [...].’, cf. Gay L. Byron: *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic*

does not arouse sexual instincts; instructions of how to sleep properly¹⁰⁸; the masturbators are recommended to fulfil their religious duties and to think about ‘important things such as the situation of Muslims in the world’ (*al-umūr al-hāmma mithl wāqi‘ al-muslimīn fī l-‘ālam*)¹⁰⁹; they are encouraged to call others to God and help them to be on the right path and to fight what is forbidden by the Law (*ad-da‘wa ilā llāh wa-musā‘adat al-ākharīn ‘alā l-hidāya wa-muḥārabat al-muḥarramāt*)¹¹⁰; they are encouraged to think about the poor and the orphans, and to volunteer in charities (*at-tafkīr fī l-fuqarā‘ wa-l-masākīn wa-l-aytām wa-mushārahakat al-djam‘iyyāt al-khayriyya fī anshīṭatihā*)¹¹¹; they are invited to go to cemeteries and hospitals and think about the situation of the sick and the dead (*adh-dhahāb li-l-maqābir wa-l-mustashfayāt wa-l-iṭṭilā‘ wa-tadabbur fī wāqi‘ al-marḍā wa-l-mawtā*).¹¹² Young masturbators furthermore are encouraged to quench their thirst for masturbation by thinking of political issues (some of which entire generations of politicians have not been able to solve): ‘[...] remember that Al-Aqṣā Mosque is a captive (*asīr*) and that one of your mothers or sisters in Palestine, Iraq or elsewhere is being raped (lit. *yuf‘al bihā l-fāhisha*) while their husbands, brothers, and fathers have to watch helplessly. [...] And where are you?! You are masturbating, enjoying music, and running after your desires as if you were devoid of reason!’¹¹³ Another common denominator that runs through much of the proposed remedies is the issue of *farāgh* ‘leisure’, i.e. the notion that the bored youth fill their time with ‘masturbation’ because they are not committed to more productive or community-oriented occupations.¹¹⁴ Obviously, the above-given apparatus of remedies not only make sense against the backdrop of a ‘natural sexual instinct’ that is all too easily aroused; furthermore it becomes clear why the discourse on masturbation can condense an entire vision of society and why speaking up against the ‘ill’ of masturbation allows for targeting anything that goes against the grain for the authors. The recommended remedies in essence are what makes up the envisioned society. As mentioned above, *social-cultural changes figure prominently in the texts*, and many of them seem to suggest that *things have become worse*, i.e. what used to be a virtuous society has toppled into something profoundly troublesome: ‘No wonder that you see that those whose imagination was pure, clean, and confined to innocent things only yesterday now permanently think

Difference in Early Christian Literature. London & New York: Routledge, 2002; p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Munadjjid *Al-‘Āda as-sayyi‘a*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Al-Khaḍir Intiṣār*, p. 21.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Al-Khaḍir Intiṣār*, p. 21.

¹¹¹ Cf. *Al-Khaḍir Intiṣār*, p. 21.

¹¹² Cf. *Al-Khaḍir Intiṣār*, p. 21.

¹¹³ Cf. *‘Imrān Al-ḥaqīqa al-djaliyya*, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ Cf. e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmSOjR3uaZQ> (accessed 16/06/2014).

about anything that has to do with sex and lust' (*yantaqilu bi-fikrihī wa-khayālihī fī kullī madjāl min madjālāt al-djins wa-sh-shahwa*).¹¹⁵ This change sometimes is said to be particularly visible in respect of women. Thus the author of the *Intiṣār* deplors that 'women who (formerly) where too shy to raise their gazes higher than their feet' (*a lā min mawḍi' qadamayhā*) now let their gazes wander freely and look at the men in the public space – and even 'pursue' them with their gazes to such an extent that some men even feel ashamed and lower their gazes (cf. the notion of *ghadd al-baṣar*).¹¹⁶ How forcefully this discourse corresponds to a struggle against social-cultural transformations and how much it seeks to reinvigorate a particular vision of society also becomes manifest when we consider warnings such as the following: 'Avoid, avoid, and again avoid unveiled women who play up their charms in the name of liberation' (*ibta'id ibta'id ibta'id kulla l-bu'd mina s-sāfira al-mutabarridja mudda iyatan at-taḥarrur*).¹¹⁷ In this context, to some the struggle against masturbation turns out to be a 'murderous war' (*ḥarb qarūs*) against an entire pack of sinister forces and a more or less enigmatic alliance of perfidious enemies all of which seek to destroy religion and society: 'The experience of many has proved that once they started to masturbate (lit. *bi-mudjarrad an bada'ū fihā*) they could not stop again even after marriage and after they had grown older. Thus, one has to deal with a murderous war in which the enemies abound, are extremely powerful and know exactly when, how and where to strike (lit. *yu'aththirūna*). They (i.e. the enemies) comprise the baser self that incites to evil (*an-naḥs al-ammāra bi-s-sū*'), the insinuations of the *shayātīn* and the *qarīn*¹¹⁸, evil companions, evil,

¹¹⁵ Al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, pp. 16-17.

¹¹⁶ Al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 16.

¹¹⁷ Al-Khaḍir *Intiṣār*, p. 24.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *EP* s. v. *qarīn* where D.B. MacDonald explains that *qarīn* '[...] means 'companion' in the largest sense (synonym of *muṣāhib* in LA and the *Ṣaḥāh*, and of *khidn* in al-Bayḍawī on *Qur'ān*, XLI, 24/25). However, for people in pre-Islamic Arabia and for Muḥammad, the word also suggested a man's spirit-companion or familiar, and this is the commonest usage in the *Qur'ān*, where *qarīn* is used eight times. If a human companion is meant in XXXVII, 49/51, *Shayṭān* is a *qarīn* in IV, 42/38, and the use of the plural *qarānā* in XLI, 24/25, together with the context, shows that tempting spirits are meant here. In this verse and in XLIII, 35/36, 37/38, a *shayṭān* is assigned (*kuyyida*) by God as a *qarīn*; al-Bayḍawī on L, 22/23, is dubious whether by *qarīn* a *shayṭān* or an angel is meant, but for L, 26/27, he is sure that a *shayṭān* is involved. In this he follows the oldest exegetical tradition as already related by al-Ṭabarī in his *Tafsīr*, xxvi, 93-4. Every human being has a *qarīn* at his side, that is, a *shayṭān* and an angel to accompany, the first of whom tempts him into evil and the second induces him to do good. The *shayṭān*, sometimes called a *djinnī*, will be thrown into hell-fire at the Judgment along with the human companion whom he has led astray. These two *qarīns* are therefore different from the recording angels who accompany each human being (*Qur'ān*, LXXXII, 10-12).' For the topic of *qarīn* see

unveiled, and depraved women and whores (lit. *nisā' as-sū' wa-s-sufūr wa-l-ahr wa-l-fasād*), as well as obscene media, films, pictures and songs.¹¹⁹ This latter quotation not only illustrates well that the 'enemy' (*adūw*) comes *both* from the inside and the outside, but also shows that (for this author at least) e.g. demons, unveiled women, and obscene movies form some sort of an 'evil continuum.' Significantly, one also finds the expression that the youth of the *umma* are 'wrung down by video clips and by masturbation' (*shabāb al-umma maṣrū' ʾin [sic] bi-l-videoclip wa-l-āda as-sirriyya*)¹²⁰ – it is well known that the lexeme *maṣrū'* often is used in the context of the machinations of the demons.

Considering that an entire vision of society is at stake here, it is plausible that the society/selves envisioned is/are some sort of an island in what is pictured as a vast sea of depravity – or as one author has put it: 'a swamp of depravity' (*mustanqa' ar-radhlīla*)¹²¹ – and *everything that allegedly is conducive to masturbation at the same time embodies influences, transformations, behaviours, thoughts, ideas (etc.) that one seeks to erase or ward off*. This image is all the easier to create given the haziness of notions such as 'nudity' – which may range from pornographic content¹²² to women who are not dressed in an 'Islamic' attire.

It needs to be stressed that the more polemical texts furthermore seem to suggest that communities which 'blindly follow their lust' (and this factually means: those who fail to live according to the standards and convictions of the authors), what among other things is conducive to masturbation, gradually cease to be human beings in the strict sense¹²³, i.e. they are said to become like beasts 'who are governed neither by religion nor by any (moral) principle and who are nothing else but slaves who are controlled by their fantasies and who (in the end only) obey their sexual cravings' (*abīd musayyarūn munqādūn warā' khayālihim wa-raghabātihim al-djinsiyya*).¹²⁴ As has already been said, some hold that those who have sunken that low share this brute character with the 'West,' characterised as '[...] a society that could not be more depraved, obscene and

also Gebhard Fartacek: *Unheil durch Dämonen. Geschichten und Diskurse über das Wirken der Ğinn. Eine sozialanthropologische Spurensuche in Syrien*. Wien: Böhlau, 2010.

¹¹⁹ Al-Khaḍīr *Intiṣār*, p. 17.

¹²⁰ Cf. <http://www.noo-problems.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-77839.html> (accessed 30/05/2014).

¹²¹ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 3.

¹²² Unsurprisingly, as in many other places of the world, (the easy access to) pornographic images is a major issue.

¹²³ Cf. also 'Imrān *Al-Haqīqa al-djaliyya*, p. 1 which clearly suggests that the targeted societal *status quo* rather represents the bottom of humanity and something dirty (cf. *hābiṭa fī sullam al-bashariyya*).

¹²⁴ Cf. *Baḥth*, p. 16.

shameless, and where they have become like beasts and mount each other in the streets' (*aṣbahū ka-l-bahā'im wa-yarkabu ba'ḍuhum ba'dan fī sh-shawāri*).¹²⁵

Against the backdrop of what has been said thus far, it seems obvious that a particular – alarmist – contemporary Arabic discourse on masturbation is a discourse on *much more* than just masturbation. It seeks to push through an entire vision of society. If, according to this discourse, masturbation is an ill, the *true* ill is a society that fails to work the way it 'should' and that is fundamentally negligent when it comes to fortifying its 'strongholds.' Given that for many authors masturbation is the superficial symptom on the surface of much more profound social ills, it does not exactly come as a surprise that the anachronistic European discourse on the disastrous harmful effects of masturbation is more than just attractive – it is a real asset and of utmost strategic value.

'The Hand is Not a Spouse': Masturbation as an 'Unnatural' Praxis

This contemporary discourse on masturbation seems to fit neatly within a particular¹²⁶ contemporary, complex discourse on *fiṭra* (i.e. the 'primordial nature' of humans). In line with the famous *ḥadīth* 'Every child is born upon the *fiṭra*, it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Polytheist', the *fiṭra*-discourse on the one hand conceives reality as dynamic and changeable.¹²⁷ Within this discourse *fiṭra* seems to epitomise the things that, as some are suggesting, 'must not' change or be transformed if a 'Muslim identity' – and the *authority* of those who define it – shall be prevented from collapsing. It goes without saying that while delimiting that sort of 'no-go zone', the *fiṭra*-discourse insists on the necessity of drawing boundaries and identifying (potential) threats to the intactness of that inviolable zone. On the other hand, though, it is plausible that the inviolable zone epitomised by the notion of *fiṭra* is not 'empty'; on the contrary, the *fiṭra*-discourse holds that it is the realm where a divinely willed and created *cosmic order* is duly respected and can unfold the way it 'should.' According to the *fiṭra*-discourse, that order is both 'moral' and 'natural', and tampering with it and its purportedly harmonious integration of 'nature' and the 'Law' is understood to be a most futile and absurd enterprise, because this order 'cannot' be changed; one can only 'rebel' against it – *in vain*. Thus, going against this order not only leads to unhappiness and disease, but also to disregard of the commands of religion.¹²⁸ It is important to stress at this point that not

¹²⁵ Al-Wādi'ī *Tuhfat aṣh-shābb*, p. 69.

¹²⁶ It is imperative to stress that there are markedly different discourses on *fiṭra* as well; a good example is provided by Kugle *Homosexuality*, p. 45 ff. For the highly complex body of Islamic thought regarding the concept of *fiṭra*, see: Geneviève Gobillot: *La fiṭra: la conception originelle; ses interprétations et fonctions chez le penseurs musulmans*. Le Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2000.

¹²⁷ Cf. Nigst 'Become What You Are', p. 170.

¹²⁸ Cf. Nigst 'Become What You Are', p. 170; p. 180.

everything corresponds to an effort to eliminate potential threats to that order in a more immediately political sense; rather it seems that more immediately political statements only make visible most clearly propositions and assumptions that also wield influence otherwise. For example, in the opinions of therapeutical ‘experts’ who seem to share with the more immediately political statements the idea of how a ‘sound *fiṭra*’ looks like (i.e. they agree upon the central propositions upheld by a particular discourse on *fiṭra*).

Now, *human ‘sexuality’* figures prominently among the topics taken up by this discourse on *fiṭra*. The main proposition thereby is that there is only *one* ‘natural’ – i.e. *fiṭra*-wise – way of being sexually active: the sexual activity that takes place between a male husband and a female spouse; sexual intercourse between a married couple (whereby in view of Q 23:5-7, the ‘spouse’ sometimes is complemented with the ‘slave girl’).¹²⁹ Thus according to this *fiṭra*-discourse, it is ‘marriage’ – and nothing else – that responds to the ‘calling of the *fiṭra*’ (*fi z-zawādī istidjāba li-dā’i l-fiṭra*)¹³⁰. It is claimed that only full sexual intercourse (*al-djīmā’ al-kāmil*) with a ‘legitimate spouse’ does not lead to ‘psychological and sexual problems.’¹³¹ As is stated in a reader comment on *tabib-web.eu*: ‘The *fiṭra* upon which God has created the people is that a man marries a woman, and that ejaculation¹³² happens through the *fiṭra*-wise and natural ways (*aṭ-turuq al-fiṭriyya aṭ-tabī’iyya*), and anything that conflicts with the *fiṭra* is necessarily harmful.’¹³³ Over and over again, the texts insist that sexual intercourse with the spouse is the ‘*fiṭra*-wise and natural way’ (*‘as-sabīl al-fiṭrī wa-t-tabī’ī a lā wa-huwa muḍāḍja ‘at az-zawādja’*)¹³⁴ and that sexual intercourse between man and woman is the *fiṭra*-wise means to unload and satisfy one’s sexual cravings (cf. *wa-l-aṣl fi tafrīghihā* [i.e. the sexual instinct] *l-djīmā’ fa-hādhīhi hiya l-fiṭra allatī faṭara ‘alayhā l-baṣhar*).¹³⁵ It therefore is essential to bear in mind that the proposition that only sexual intercourse between legitimate spouses conforms to the *fiṭra* is part and parcel of the more general proposition that the aforementioned cosmic order works along the line of the *complementarity of*

¹²⁹ Qur’ān 23:5-7 reads: ‘And who guard their modesty / Save from their wives or the (slaves) that their right hands possess, for then they are not blameworthy / But whoso craveth beyond that, such are transgressors.’ (Pickthall).

¹³⁰ Cf. <http://www.omanya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=69215> (accessed 08/07/2014).

¹³¹ Cf. *Baḥth*, p.7.

¹³² The texts says *istimnā’* at this point; usually *istimnā’* means ‘masturbation’, but obviously that does not make much sense here.

¹³³ Cf. http://www.tabib-web.eu/article_details.php?thesid=2578&catid=82 (accessed 08/07/2014).

¹³⁴ Cf. <http://www.forsanhaq.com/showthread.php?t=86206> (accessed 31/05/2014).

¹³⁵ ‘Abdalī *Al-‘Āda as-sirriyya*, p. 9.

the sexes (cf. the notion *takāmul*) which is constructed as the ‘original.’¹³⁶ As I have suggested elsewhere, this emphasis on ‘complementarity’ seems to be directed against a multitude of issues that are firmly rejected (such as the ‘equality of the sexes’; ‘homosexuality’; ‘women’s liberation’; etc.) – all of them are discarded as being (completely) at odds with the ‘unchangeable’ *fiṭra*, flouted only by wrong-headed, misguided, or malevolent people.¹³⁷

Manifestly, the issue of ‘masturbation’ smoothly fits into this discourse on *fiṭra*. According to this discourse, ‘masturbation’ is some sort of a slap to the face of what is constructed as the *one and only* kind of sexual activity that conforms to the *fiṭra* – and ‘accordingly’ is lawful. Over and over again, it is stated that masturbation is a harmful and forbidden ‘habit’ that contradicts the ‘sound *fiṭra*’ (cf. ‘*al-āda aḍ-ḍārra wa-l-muḥarrama wa-llatī tunāfi l-fiṭra as-salīma*’¹³⁸; ‘*ḥaqīqat al-amr al-āda as-sirriyya hiya mukhālifa awwalan li-l-fiṭra*’¹³⁹). After all, ‘the hand with the help of which man practices this ‘secret habit’ neither is a spouse, nor a slave-girl’ (‘*al-yad allatī yumārisu bihā l-insān hādhihī l-āda as-sirriyya laysat zawḍja wa-laysat milk yamīn*’¹⁴⁰), as it is stated with reference to Q 23:5-7. Semen has to be guarded as much as possible, because it is the ‘liquid of life that has to be poured into the wombs’ – and nowhere else (cf. ‘*iḥfaz maniyyaka mā staṭa ta fa-innahū // mā’u l-ḥayāti yuṣabbu fī l-arḥām*’).¹⁴¹ This discourse also clearly surfaces in the statements of medical and therapeutical ‘experts’ in whose ‘expert knowledge’ religious and ‘expert’ arguments intertwine to the point of indistinguishability: ‘Doctor Djamāl Shafiḳ Aḥmad, professor of psychotherapy at ‘Ayn Shams University, said that it was natural (*min aṭ-ṭabī‘ī*) for a woman to attain sexual satisfaction through the lawful sexual relation with her husband, yet some spouses occasionally resort to masturbation to attain pleasure, and this by essence contradicts the straight *fiṭra* of how to effect sexual pleasure and satisfaction’ (‘*wa-hādihā mā yukhālifu fī ḍjawharihī l-fiṭra as-sawīyya li-taḥqīq al-mut‘a wa-l-ishbā‘ al-ḍjinsī*’¹⁴²). Accordingly, masturbation is categorised as deviant sexual behaviour (*inḥirāf ḍjinsī sulūkī*). Again and again, it is explained that to reach sexual pleasure with-

¹³⁶ Cf. the opposition between *aṣl* and *zuhūr* in ‘Abdalī *Al-‘Āda as-sirriyya*, p. 9. See also Mohammed H. Benkheira: *L’amour de la Loi. Essai sur la normativité en islām*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997; pp. 196ff; pp. 202 ff.

¹³⁷ Cf. Nigst ‘*Become What You Are*’, pp. 176-181.

¹³⁸ Cf. <http://www.islamweb.org/consult/index.php?page=Details&id=2231636> (accessed 08/07/2014).

¹³⁹ Cf. <http://www.omanya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=69215> (accessed 08/07/2014).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. <http://www.omanya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=69215> (accessed 08/07/2014).

¹⁴¹ Cf. Munadḍjid *Al-‘Āda as-sayyi‘a*, p. 11.

¹⁴² Cf. <http://alkhabarpress.com> (accessed 08/07/2014).

out the need for a partner is a ‘huge problem’ (*mushkila kibīra giddan*¹⁴³), as Heba Qoṭb puts it, because it means to ‘deviate from the *fiṭra*; from nature [...], because God has created people in such a way that man needs woman, and woman needs man. If a man or woman contents himself or herself with himself or herself in terms of sexual pleasure without the need for a partner, that is a deviation from the *fiṭra* and from nature.’¹⁴⁴ The texts are worried specifically that ‘masturbation’ – helped on by pornography (etc.) – might develop into some sort of a ‘non-*fiṭra*-wise substitute’ (*badīl ḡhayr fiṭrī*) for the *fiṭra*-wise sexual activity with the legitimate spouse/husband.¹⁴⁵ This latter remark is a good occasion to underline once more that this discourse on masturbation is a discourse on much more than just masturbation. Generally speaking, it holds that *the practice always is an unmistakable sign that ‘things are going fundamentally wrong’* in some respect(s). More specifically, according to this discourse, masturbation is a telling example of the consequences produced by a world that has deviated from the *fiṭra* and that has been flooded by negative foreign influences; of the baleful state of affairs that has replaced (or threatens to replace) what could be the blissful realm of life lived in conformity with the *fiṭra*. As has been seen above, the notion that ‘things are going fundamentally wrong’ is however quite flexible, i.e. ‘masturbation’ regularly serves to decry ways of life, social transformations, and ideas that threaten a particular vision of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and this vision is being *withdrawn* from discussion, because, after all, it allegedly is sheer respect of ‘nature.’ It furthermore should be added at this point that the occurrence of masturbation often is suggested to be indicative of the difficulty of young people to possess the necessary financial means to marry (see above), i.e. it is being suggested that the ‘epidemic’ of masturbation also may bespeak economic problems.

The ‘Devil’ in the Home

It seems that a more specific branch of the contemporary Arabic texts about masturbation can be found mainly in the GCC-countries (this does not seem to be a coincidence; see below). Apparently many people seek advice, because they have *discovered that their relatively young children masturbate*: ‘I saw how my sister who is six years old masturbated, and what I saw struck me like a lightning.’¹⁴⁶ Accounts such as these are common with the children involved often being younger. The probing question seems to be: *How did these children*

¹⁴³ The speaker switches between the MSA-pronunciation /*dj*/ for *djīm*, and the Cairene Arabic pronunciation /*g*/.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTiudEjyZEY&feature=related> (accessed 16/05/2011).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. <http://www.forsanhaq.com/showthread.php?t=86206> (accessed 31/05/2014).

¹⁴⁶ Cf. <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/archive/index.php/t-855772.html> (accessed 18/05/2014).

actually learn to masturbate? Like in the European ‘crusade’ against masturbation, people mostly seem to suggest that the incentive for the children to masturbate came from the *outside*, i.e. allegedly the children were *seduced* to do so.¹⁴⁷ Of course, there is the possibility that the children discovered the practice themselves per chance¹⁴⁸ (as some of the interrogated children seem to suggest: ‘*bi-nafsī ta ‘allamtuhū bi-nafsī!*’)¹⁴⁹. According to the texts consulted for the present study, however, there are more likely negative influences that accidentally or wilfully ‘introduced’ the children to masturbation. In particular, the *nannies, maids, or drivers* are highly suspected in this respect. As someone states: ‘The first person you might want to suspect is the maid – keep her away from your sister (who masturbates) and watch her’ (*awwal shakhs qad tashukkīna fihā l-khādima ab ‘idihā ‘an ukhtiki wa-rāqibī taḥarrukātihā*).¹⁵⁰ The arguments voiced here again are strikingly similar to what Michel Foucault has documented for 18th and 19th century France.¹⁵¹ To begin with, nannies are said to use masturbation as a calmative, i.e. they use it to make the children sleep.¹⁵² ‘When the children cry and the nannies fail to calm them and make them stop crying, they resort to touching and rubbing their sexual organs to calm them and make them quiet’ (...*al-murabbiyāt hīnamā yabkī t-tīfl wa-ta ‘djizu ‘alā tahdī’atihī aw at-tawaqquf ‘an il-bukā’ talḍja’u li-mulāmasat wa-taḥrīk a ‘dāhu [sic] at-tanāsuliyya li-tahdī’atihī wa-iskānihī*).¹⁵³ Yet, in contradistinction to the contemporary Arabic discourse on the physical harmful effects of masturbation, where a direct influence of the relevant European discourse seems undeniable, in the case of the negative influence exerted by servants, the resemblance between the historical European discourse documented by Foucault and the contemporary Arabic material rather seems to be due to *social situations that are characterised by what might be termed a similar ‘structure’* (i.e. in this case, the reference to Foucault is of an entirely heuristic value). In this context, Foucault stressed that ‘[t]he entire campaign against masturbation from early on was directed [...] against the sexual seduction of the children through adults, and more than through the adults through the immediate environment, *including all the persons who then formed an obligatory part of the household* such as maids,

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, pp. 320-322.

¹⁴⁸ This seems to be the opinion of e.g. Heba Qoṭb; cf. <https://majdah.maktoob.com/vb/majdah130988/> (accessed 14/07/2014).

¹⁴⁹ Cf. <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/archive/index.php/t-855772.html> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁵⁰ Cf. <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/archive/index.php/t-855772.html> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁵¹ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 321-325.

¹⁵² Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 321.

¹⁵³ Cf. http://www.gulfkids.com/ar/index.php?action=show_art&ArtCat=4&id=1155 (accessed 18/05/2014); cf. also <http://sabq.org/ST5fde> (accessed 18/05/2014).

governesses, tutors, uncles, aunts, cousins etc.; all of this may place itself between the virtuousness of the parents and the natural innocence of the children and introduce this dimension of perversion.’¹⁵⁴ There is good evidence within the contemporary Arabic material that the maids and drivers are thought to be some sort of a ‘permanent threat’ in this respect. Over and over again one reads of parents who found out that their children learned how to masturbate from the maid: ‘After I argued (with my little girl) I understood that she had watched the maid masturbate’ (*fahimtu minhā annahā kānat tarā l-khādima tumārisu l-‘āda as-sirriyya*).¹⁵⁵ Foucault pointed to some sort of ‘fundamental distrust’ of servants and suggested that the campaign against masturbation in 18th and 19th century France accordingly seems to have been directed against such familial intermediaries.¹⁵⁶ He spoke about a ‘fully-fledged obsessive idea about servants’ in this respect: ‘The devil is in the home, right beside the child, in the form the adult – that is, essentially in the form of the adult intermediary.’¹⁵⁷ The contemporary Arabic texts that specifically deal with the suspicion that the children have learned masturbation from the servants often come close to such an ‘obsessive idea’, i.e. the ‘devil is in the home’ again: ‘How many times shall we repeat it: Don’t leave your kids with the servants, but rather take them to nurseries! Yet there are still neglectful mothers... I once had a client whose husband had confessed to her that when he was eight years old, their maid was on intimate terms with him like a married couple (*tu ‘āshiruhū mu ‘āsharat al-azwādj*) for two full years; another young client told me that she learned how to masturbate from the maid when she was a girl. Unfortunately, she has become a lesbian and was suspended from school for this reason. Maids with abnormal and criminal leanings all too often appear to have a peaceful character, to be of utmost gentleness, and the pinnacle of sheer goodness. As a matter of fact, criminals normally display the opposite of what they hide deep inside (*tabdū l-khādima dhāt al-muyūl ash-shādhdh [sic] wa-l-mudjrima hādī‘at at-ṭibā‘ musālima li-l-ghāya wa-fī muntahā ṭ-ṭiba inna l-mudjrimīn ghāliban mā yuḥirūna ‘aksa mā yubṭinūna*).¹⁵⁸ This ‘fully-fledged obsessive idea’ sometimes is stated explicitly: ‘Every woman who sees the drama of the maids, says to herself: I’ll be the exception! My maid is different! My maid is good! While in reality all women who have had to deal with the disasters produced by the maids have said exactly the same thing’ (*kull imra‘a hīnamā tarā ma‘āsī l-khādimat taqūl li-nafsihā illā anā khādimatī anā ghayr khādimatī tayyiba wa-l-ḥaqīqa anna kull man ta‘arradna li-maṣā‘ib*

¹⁵⁴ Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 321; my emphasis.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. <http://consult.islamweb.net/consult/index.php/index.php?page=Details&id=293892> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 322.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Foucault *Die Anormalen*, p. 322. For this point see also: Philippe Ariès: *Geschichte der Kindheit*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003; p. 196.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. <https://uqu.edu.sa/page/ar/93193516> (accessed 02/06/2014).

al-khādimāt qulna nafs ash-shay').¹⁵⁹ Over and over again, the advice is not to leave the children with the maids: 'My advice to you is: In case you do have a maid, don't rely on her (when it comes to your girl), and take care that the little girl never is alone with her' (*naṣīhatī ilayki idhā kāna 'indaki khādima lā ta 'tamidī 'alayhā wa-lā taḍa 'ī t-tifla bi-mufradihā ma 'ahā*).¹⁶⁰ Likewise the male servants employed by the family are potentially dangerous: '[...] a perverted servant, too, may show your boy the way to this vile habit [i.e. masturbation] and practice it with him, and he might thus learn it, and cling to it' (*kamā anna l-khādim al-munḥarif yumkinu an yadulla l-walad 'alā hādhihī l-'āda al-qabīḥa wa-yumārisahā ma 'ahū fa-yata 'allamuhā wa-yata 'allaqu bihā*).¹⁶¹

The above given material is significant insofar as it adds another dimension to the 'discourse of the dangerous nannies' that seems to flourish in the GCC countries. There is good evidence for a discourse that rests upon the fundamental assumption that the 'influx of things foreign' threatens to corrupt the *fiṭra* 'primordial nature' – not the least the *fiṭra* of children. According to this discourse, non-Muslim nannies are dangerous because they may exert a negative influence on the religious upbringing of local Muslim children, for example, through practicing their non-Muslim religious rites in front of them – and thus turn them away from their inborn *fiṭra* and 'Islam.'¹⁶² It is striking to observe that the very same idea that the 'influx of things foreign' is highly detrimental and destructive for the local 'Islamic society', and in particular for the local children, also *seems to be playing into the topic of masturbation*. The domestic servants and nannies most immediately embody the lurking danger – in this case by introducing a sexual practice that allegedly threatens the only 'natural' and 'lawful' form of sexual activity. Of course, domestic servants and nannies may abuse children and entertain relationships with them that are not suitable. Yet it is absurd to pretend and assume that the (local) children could only have discovered masturbation through the (foreign) servants. This probably tells more about societies that are going through enormous transformations. It hardly is a coincidence that this rather specific ramification of the discourse on masturbation seems to be found in the prosperous economies of the GCC countries, where socio-cultural transformations not only are most obvious, but to which huge numbers of foreign workforce have flocked who inevitably are present in the 'Muslim homes.'

¹⁵⁹ Cf. <https://uaesm.maktoob.com/vb/uae813513-670-print/> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. <http://forum.z4ar.com/f94/t107278.html> (accessed 18/05/2014).

¹⁶¹ Cf. *Nuzhat al-albāb*, p. 6.

¹⁶² Cf. Nigst 'Become What You Are', p. 184.

Conclusion

There is good evidence for a specific discourse on masturbation in the Arab countries. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to capture this meandering discourse (which does not correspond to a general stance vis-à-vis the practice). As holds true for the historical discourse(s) on masturbation in Europe, this contemporary Arabic discourse is worthy of consideration. A closer scrutiny of the respective material reveals that this discourse mostly is not just about masturbation. Rather, the occurrence of masturbation is suggested to be the unmistakable sign that ‘things are going terribly wrong’, i.e. in important respects, this discourse is a discourse on ‘unwanted changes’ and ‘transformations.’ Through dwelling on masturbation and its purported harmful effects, it seems to point a finger at what it sees as a deplorable societal *status quo*, and while doing so, it in essence conjures up the notion of what could be termed a ‘society free of suffering’ (i.e. a society where everything conducive to masturbation is removed). Now, significantly, the discourse on ‘masturbation’ in important respects neatly fits within a particular discourse on *fiṭra*, which implies that the discourse on ‘masturbation’ complements and reinforces discourses on other practices (etc.) which are seen as being at odds with the *fiṭra*. These discourses belong together, because it seems that this ‘society free of suffering’ is being constructed as the place where nobody ‘rebels’ (or is allowed to ‘rebel’?) against the *fiṭra* and a divinely ordained ‘cosmic order’; the place where the ‘Law’ and ‘nature’ harmoniously integrate and work to their mutual benefit; where humans have learned how to acquiesce into their ‘truth’ (and to the experts for that ‘truth’). Yet it is precisely this ‘truth’ that contains an entire vision of society, which masturbation and its purported causes – alongside a host of other ‘ills’ – are said to disturb. This can be argued more in ‘religious’ or ‘therapeutical’ terms – or in a combination of both. In any case, many of the texts and videos consulted for the present study convey the notion that a particular vision of society and the authority connected to it run the risk of being challenged and of losing their influence. It immediately makes sense that the alleged harmful effects of masturbation are of eminent strategical value. They are something ‘natural’ given the purportedly ‘unnatural’ character of the practice. They corroborate that the occurrence of masturbation indicates that ‘something is going terribly wrong’, and they ‘prove’ that the own vision of society is the only ‘truly possible’ one, and the only ‘normal’ way of living that befits human ‘nature.’ What could demonstrate this better than the fact that those who disobey both ‘nature’ and the ‘Law’ (at least in the long run) fall *ill*? Given that the ‘danger’ that people ‘fall victim’ to masturbation potentially threatens *everybody*, this vision of society likewise embraces *everybody*. Accordingly, to insist that masturbation is deleterious allows for denying ways of living that contradict one’s own vision of society (and ideas that one rejects; various resistance movements; etc.) all respect, justification, and authority. On the contrary, they are claimed to be responsible

for societal conditions that – among other things – lead to the increasing occurrence of masturbation. At the same time, it is plausible that those who are propagating this discourse are trying to push back influences that are perceived as a threat to this vision and insist that boundaries have to be (re)drawn. Without mistaking this for the only source of inspiration, a sizeable share of the contemporary Arabic discourse on masturbation thereby seems to fall back on and revive ideas known from the ‘crusade’ against masturbation that took place in Europe throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. As a matter of fact, the notion of a ‘total disease’ known from the historical European discourse clearly resurfaces in some sources.

That the discourse on masturbation is firmly linked with the issue of socio-cultural transformations and changes is corroborated further by a specific ramification of the discourse on masturbation that seems to exist in the GCC countries and that links the occurrence of masturbation with the increasing presence of (foreign) domestic servants in the (local) ‘Muslim homes’, i.e. it holds that the local children actually have learned how to masturbate from foreigners.

It is crucial, though, to bear in mind that the discourse on masturbation, on which the present study focuses, may partly be comprehensible, because the influences which it decries and wishes to push back, are not necessarily a mere chimaera. This does not at all imply that one has to subscribe to its content, but it may help to explain why it has its momentum and persuasiveness. As questionable as it may be, it seems to articulate the feeling to be overrun by certain things. As has been seen further above, this does not only concern ideas or concepts, but also military occupation or assaults. This makes it very difficult to analyse this discourse, because, while dealing with ‘masturbation’, it seems to ‘condense’ questions of dominance. Thus, it is as much a replica of dominance as it is an instrument of dominance.

In any case, it will be necessary to develop further-reaching research questions that relate to the topic and which cannot be explored in this preliminary study. For example, what does the (at least implicit) equation of ‘conformance to the *fiṭra*’ and ‘health’ – which has surfaced in the context of masturbation, but touches upon much more (e.g. ‘homosexuality’) – potentially have in store? Could it even turn into some sort of religiously inspired ‘biopolitics’? What about the suffering that those who propagate this particular discourse on *fiṭra*, masturbation (etc.) inflict upon others whom they (implicitly or expressly) pathologise and moralise *with* their discourse? Is there anyone who speaks up against the fact that they are vilifying what often simply are attempts at enlarging what Didier Eribon has termed ‘l’espace de la liberté possible’?¹⁶³ Does the association of ‘*fiṭra*’ and ‘health’ contribute to rationalising forms of social ex-

¹⁶³ Cf. Didier Eribon: *Hérésies. Essais sur la théorie de la sexualité*. Paris: Librerie Arthème Fayard, 2003; p. 47.

clusion in terms of both 'religion' and 'health' (cf. e.g. the discourse on the maids)? What does the discourse on masturbation have to tell about changing gender relations (or the call for respective changes)? What does it have to tell about changing relations between the generations? What does it have to tell about the fear that specific categories of perception might be losing their sway? It is furthermore worthwhile to keep in mind that the negative assessment of certain socio-cultural transformations within the discourse on masturbation depend on a particular point of view. The latter by no means is necessarily commonly shared, however much it may be pretended otherwise. How, then, do those for whom such transformations are eminently positive (and maybe even the goal or outcome of their struggles) challenge this discourse? How do those who do not subscribe to the vision of society propagated by that discourse – or are even plainly denigrated by it – react to a discourse that, by means of expatiating upon masturbation, is a profoundly moralising enterprise that tends to address *much more* than just masturbation? How do they react to a discourse, which concerns and preaches down on and their bodies, their thoughts, their dreams, and their loves? In short, their entire lives? Finally, does not the research into the discourse on 'masturbation' and its wider discursive environment, too, bespeak the need to address the fact that the social world is ridden by hierarchies and processes of inferiorization, and that *all of these* have to be considered *together*?¹⁶⁴ How will it be possible to counter all the, speaking with Franz Kafka, *Gemeinschaften von Schurken* (communities of scoundrels) – on whatever base they are founded?

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Eribon: *Hérésies*, p. 47.