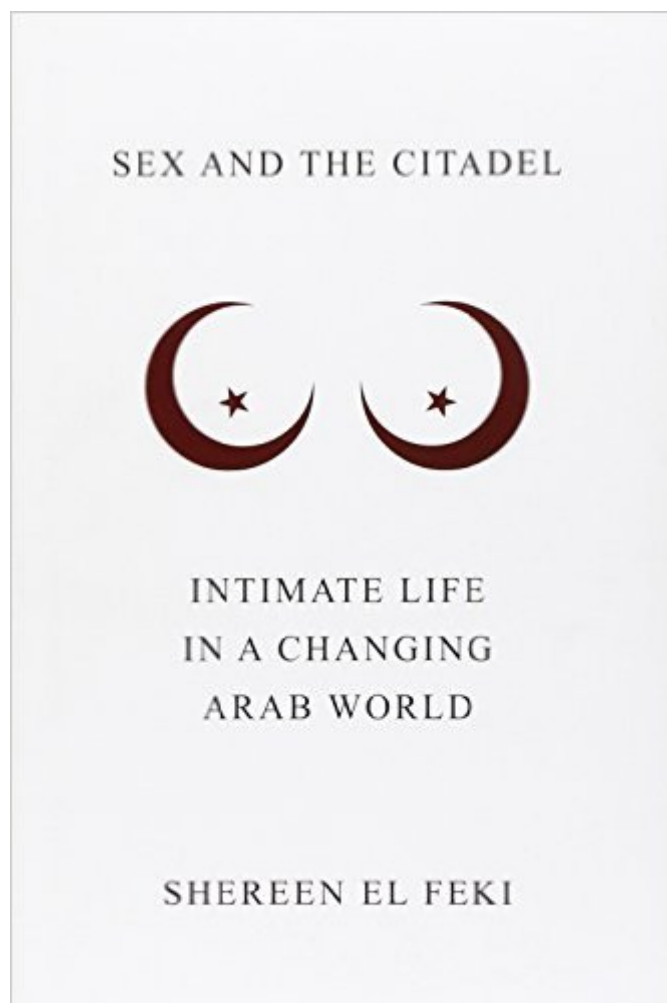


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# Sex And The Citadel: Intimate Life In A Changing Arab World



## Synopsis

**\*\*Kirkus Best Books of the Year (2013)\*\*** If you really want to know a people, start by looking inside their bedrooms. As political change sweeps the streets and squares, the parliaments and presidential palaces of the Arab world, Shereen El Feki has been looking at an upheaval a little closer to home in the sexual lives of men and women in Egypt and across the region. The result is an informative, insightful, and engaging account of a highly sensitive and still largely secret aspect of Arab society. Sex is entwined in religion, tradition, politics, economics, and culture, so it is the perfect lens through which to examine the complex social landscape of the Arab world. From pregnant virgins to desperate housewives, from fearless activists to religious firebrands, from sex work to same-sex relations, *Sex and the Citadel* takes a fresh look at the sexual history of the region and brings new voices to the debate over its future. This is no peep show or academic treatise but a highly personal and often humorous account of one woman's journey to better understand Arab society at its most intimate and, in the process, to better understand her own origins. Rich with five years of groundbreaking research, *Sex and the Citadel* gives us a unique and timely understanding of everyday lives in a part of the world that is changing before our eyes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

El Feki has a unique perspective with access to frank discussions with her father's relatives and the ability to compare with Western mores based on being raised in Canada with a Welsh mother. She ties attitudes towards gender roles to the ability to create a democratic society after the overthrow of Mubarak. She found that for many in the Arab world, Western values include homosexuality, sex

before marriage, mixing of the sexes, women's liberation and pornography. They're believed to undermine Islam and traditional Arab values, observed Shereen El Feki. She spent two years interviewing Arabs about sex for her book *Sex and the Citadel*. The irony, she adds, is that discussion of sexual pleasure and "so much of what they brand as dangerous foreign ideas were features of the Arab-Islamic world long before they were embraced by Western liberalism." She notes the fear of Western ideas was coupled with a feeling of inferiority that followed Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the British occupation from 1882 to 1952. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s, Hassan al-Banna taught that part of the reason for loss of political power was Egyptian's sexual immorality and that the solution was to follow Shaira law. (Surveys indicate about a third of Arab young men are sexually active before marriage, compared to about 20% of young women). Most Egyptian young women now cover their hair, while their mothers and grandmothers didn't and could wear short skirts without being harassed. In the 1960s and '70s sex was an accepted aspect of films until the rise of Islamic conservatism and official censorship. A return to Islamic fundamentalism was a form of protest against dictatorship, the most extreme form taught by the Salafi movement.

I write thrillers and have a protagonist in Morocco and a Bedouin woman in Spain; I'd like the Bedouin to be a voice of Muslim feminism. *Sex and the Citadel* is the third book I've read, and the most recently published, building support for the voice I seek; it's the most approachable, and great fun to read. *Sex and the Citadel* is also a powerful resource for the young and curious woman in the Middle East. Shereen El Feki, a half Welsh, half Egyptian woman, does a marvelous job of reaching analytically into the sexual mores of the Arab Muslim world. She spent two years, asking and listening, with Arab women from Egypt and across the Middle East. On this mental journey, through the lens of a thoroughly modern Muslim woman, El Feki leads the reader on a fascinating examination of the attitudes of Muslim women about sexuality, and more. El Feki can really write. Time spent as a journalist for the *Economist* seems to have been well spent; the story flows cleanly and maintains the reader's interest. She's smart; an early doctorate in molecular immunology from Cambridge attests to that. The modern phenomenon of Internet Cloud-connected 'everything' allows fascinating discussions of the impact of new knowledge flowing into the Muslim home, beyond the censoring control of the governments. The reader is exposed to several modern web-oriented paths used to educate the budding Muslim feminist. One is Muntada Jansaneya, the Arab Forum for Sexuality, Education and Health. There are others discussed. Some parts of the book catch one by surprise by evoking a sudden guffaw. El Feki's story of Muslim women searching the internet for

information on 'sexual aids' is special, as efforts to translate descriptive material labor.

Shereen Feki, the daughter of an Egyptian man and a Welsh mother, looks at the connection between the expression of sexuality and the pursuit of freedom in general. She argues that Muslims were not always so sexually suppressed as they are today, but that the tyranny of dictatorship has used sexual repression within the patriarchal Middle Eastern societies as the most powerful tool of general suppression in their regimes. With all the changes that Middle Eastern societies have been going through in the Arab Spring uprisings, Feki wanted to see what changes, if any, are taking place in regards to sexuality. She looks at women's sexual rights, the importance of virginity, sex workers, homosexuality and transgender. She concentrates mostly on Egypt, but looks at some issues in Morocco, Lebanon and Tunisia as well. Feki was born and raised in Canada, but spent summers with her relatives in Egypt. In a way, this book is an attempt to understand her roots and get to know her relatives better. These parts, where she has real discussions with friends and relatives are most interesting and revealing. She also talks to famous feminists, activists, authors and film makers, and while these people often provide the most shocking information, the tone is different than talking to family. I found it a little jarring. On the other hand, I was inspired and genuinely happy to know about these stereotype busting women. My personal reading list has a few more titles added to it. This book is meant to be read by the general public and thus does not employ academic language. I would call it "kicky". The language is easily accessible and she occasionally uses crude words and makes jokes. However, the content of the book is scholarly.

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