This issue of *Hawwa* challenges dominant views of sexuality in Islamic societies. Our understanding of sexuality in the Islamic World has been shaped by a number of sources that include Islamic, Orientalist, feminist and pop-cultural discourses. In terms of scholarship traditional Islamic and Orientalist discourses have shaped our academic understanding the most. Both discourses have competing visions of sexuality. On the one hand, they view female sexuality as being controlled by both men and the regulations put forth in the Qur'an and Islamic Law. Islam is caricatured as “a way of life,” whereby the Qur'an is viewed as reflecting the actual lived experiences of Muslims, frozen in time. These rigid interpretations by both traditional Islamic and Orientalist scholarship offer no opportunity for lived experiences; however, such experiences often result in variations in interpretation and unexpected social traditions. Islamist discourses often strive to control women’s sexuality as it threatens to unleash chaos on the umma while Orientalists have used that discourse as evidence of woman’s oppression within Islam. This discourse of repression is perpetuated in many Western discussions on sexuality in Islam and portrays women as dominated by their male oppressors and devoid of any agency of their own. This Orientalist discourse can be found in the writings of Orientalists, modernists and feminists described in Helena Kaler’s article “Inscribing Gender in the Imperial Context: The ‘Woman Question’ in Nineteenth Century Egypt” published in this volume.

On the other hand, an opposing representation in these sources depicts women’s sexuality as uncontrolled, unleashed and immoral. These images can include the graphic depiction of Gustav Flaubert’s prostitute-lover Küçük Hanem with whom he had an affair during his tour of nineteenth-century Egypt. Yet in earlier Islamic literary traditions women are depicted as having a dangerous sexuality that
must be controlled or even avoided as in the utopian vision of twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufayl. The utopia of Hayy ibn Yaqzan is found on the island of Waq Waq where the protagonist lives isolated, nurtured by a gazelle rather than a human mother. Furthermore, later accounts of the island describe sexual encounters on the island as being well beyond the natural. Ibn al-Wardi’s fifteenth-century narrative elaborates on the Waq Waq myth to include “trees that bear ‘fruit like women, with shapes, bodies, eyes, hands, feet, breasts and vulvas like the vulvas of women. They are the most beautiful of face and hang by their hair. They come out of cases like big swords and when they feel the wind and sun, they yell, ‘Waq Waq’ until their hair tears apart.’ When their hair tears, they die.”1 The male utopian visions of endless sexual access to virgins recall depictions of big-eyed virgins (houri) in the Qur’anic heaven. However, in the literary rendering, sexuality is often coupled with death as in the dying of the virgin fruit on Waq Waq. This also reoccurs with the gynocide portrayed in the One Thousand and One Nights whereby Shahrazade must narrate stories to save womankind from the troubled King Shahrayar who develops a taste for marring virgins then killing them the next morning.2

Shahrayar’s campaign against women in The One Thousand and One Nights frame story is in reaction to the uncontrollable female sexuality he has witnessed first hand. King Shahrayar’s lusty wife has an uncontrollable sexual appetite that results in an orgy with her slaves in the courtyard of her husband’s palace when he is gone. Her actions bring about her death as well as those of other women as Shahrayar’s wrath ripples through his kingdom.

These various images of sexuality, centuries apart from one another, convey a reoccurring image of the sexual threat found in the lascivious Muslim woman that is found in classical Arabic literature and later European travel writings. Sometimes these representations coexist, the repressive and the overt sexual, resulting in contradictory images of female sexuality that have formed much

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