

Sexual Healing: How big is *Kalaam Kibeer*?

By Anna Swank

May, 2007. “Sex,” announces Dr. Heba Kotb, a close-up of her pretty, veiled face appearing in this promotion on TV screens all over the Arab World. As if playing the part of a shocked viewer, the camera zips out, revealing a full-length shot of Egypt’s sexologist-turned-starlet. She gives a reproving gaze and beckons. “Come on, don’t be scared,” she reassures the trembling camera and its constituents back home. Slowly, it creeps back toward her. “That’s right,” Dr. Kotb addresses her audience directly once again. “We’re going to talk about sex.”

And she does, every Saturday night. At 11:30 on the Egyptian satellite channel El Mehwar, red bars marked “Caution!” warn viewers of the racy program to follow. Then the culprit appears: a pleasant Muslim woman, smiling with conspiratorial charm, her name and her show scribbled beside her—Dr. Heba Kotb, in *Kalaam Kibeer* (“Big Talk”).

Dr. Heba talks a big talk indeed. She has a message and is in a hurry to deliver it: being a good Muslim means having good sex.

Seated in a swanky studio living room, eyes and spike heels a-sparkling, she welcomes her viewers to the show, introduces the topic for the evening, and begins a lecture. Whatever the topic, Dr. Kotb weaves her core message into each quick-paced presentation. That is: while people need to educate themselves about sex, they should only try it within the frame of marriage, in which sex is the key to marital happiness, and in turn Islamic society. All along, Dr. Kotb refers back to Islamic sources, reminding her viewers of the Prophet's loving relationship with his wives.

Within this traditional religious frame however, Kotb does not spare the graphic details. In one episode, she reminds her viewers of a woman's capacity to have multiple orgasms in a single sexual encounter, allowing for longer, more creative intercourse. "Remember," she advises, "to take advantage of both kinds of orgasm: outer—achieved through foreplay—and inner—achieved through penetration." Dr. Kotb's cheery, didactic lecturing style clips over these juicy particulars with the same ease and nonchalance as over relevant Quranic verses and Hadith (biographical writings on the Prophet). Kotb manages to be at once schoolmarmy and modern.

"This is something entirely new in the Arab World," declares *Kalaam Kibeer's* director and manager Ibrahim Hamoda with pride. "And it's one hundred percent Egyptian."

Kotb and Hamoda do not limit their goal to novelty alone: they hope to achieve a tangible, even revolutionary, effect on their society. Kotb aims to “give every Egyptian the ‘vaccination’ against the sickness of sexual ignorance”; Hamoda claims that “this show could change the culture.” This is a tall order indeed for a society in which talking about sex remains a religious and cultural taboo for many. Indeed, given the widespread view in Egypt that it is shameful for women to discuss sex in a public setting, female satellite celebrities like Kotb face obstacles merely being aired. But according to Egyptian TV anchor Buthayna Kamel (whose work we will look at later), the satellite community is the Arab World’s brightest hope for a more democratic future, and with it a space to challenge cultural taboos.

There are good reasons to believe, as Kamel does, that satellite television may be the best venue for such cultural change in the Arab World today. Whilst the multiplicity of channels offered by satellite does not guarantee the growth of liberal discourse in Arab society at large, it does increase the space for programming tackling taboo subjects which viewers can seek out independently. In addition, the participatory nature of many satellite programs—the emphasis on viewer forums and live call-in components—encourages viewers to exercise their right to self-expression. Moreover, the rapid improvements in production quality, content and freedom in Arab satellite programming over the past few years has endowed taboo-tackling television with a credibility and authority which was previously unattainable. Should these trends continue the popularity of shows like *Kalaam Kibeer* can only increase. And in countries such as Egypt, where a perceived decline in the quality of education has damaged faith in schools, there is

potential for television viewers to seek out educational material on satellite TV. Despite a perennial dearth in formal sex education, young Egyptians are more likely to seek answers to their sexual curiosity than their parents because of satellite television. Dr. Heba Kotb hopes to convince as many of these searchers as possible that she can provide the right information for them

Who is Heba?

Besides being a devout Muslim, Dr. Kotb is a medical professional, with a PhD in Forensic medicine from Cairo University and a degree in Sexology from Maimonides University in Florida. Her dissertation, "Sexuality in Islam," won the prize for best research in 2004. "At first I was afraid to suggest the topic," Kotb remembers, "but then the president of the university himself suggested it! I realized there really is a curiosity about sex in Islam, and thanks to God, I had the qualifications to inform people about it."

Although Kotb ascended to TV stardom just last year, she has been working to spread her message of Islamic sexual health for the past six. She teaches at Ain Shams School of Medicine, lectures throughout the Middle East, and runs her own marital counseling clinic in Cairo. Meeting with husbands and wives both separately and together, Dr. Kotb augments her advice with visuals on her laptop, and assigns her patients homework between sessions. Kotb has designed curricula providing sex education for different age groups: teenagers, couples on the verge of getting married,

those already married who have sex problems, or those merely looking to boost their sex life.

In 2004 Kotb began a write-in marital advice column in Egypt's largest daily, *Al Ahrām*, called *Al Ghuruf Al Mughlaqa* ("Behind Closed Doors"), from which she has compiled and published a two-volume set called *Lil Kubaar Faqat* ("For Adults Only"). She invited her readers to lay their problems bare by refuting the belief she believes lies at the heart of sexual ignorance in the Arab World: "There is no moral shame in sex, and marital relations behind closed doors are not scary!"¹ Many answered the call. Still, Kotb's influence remained limited to the wealthy and the literate. She needed to reach further.

After appearing as a guest on a number of Arabic talk shows, Kotb began receiving invitations from TV channels to take her own act on the air. Kotb chose El Mehwar. "Many channels invited me, but all of them except for El Mehwar wanted to place limits on the show, to censor me in some way or another. Iqra, for example, the Islamic channel—they approached me and offered me a slot, but with conditions. So I refused. I could not do this show under conditions—I needed to have complete freedom. El Mehwar gave me that freedom."

El Mehwar, an independent Egyptian channel on air since early 2002, broadcasts a mix of entertainment and current affairs programming. Like other private Egyptian satellite television stations, it is partly owned by the government through the compulsory

stakes bought by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), NileSat and Egypt Media City (EMC). However, the station is editorially independent.² As the democratic trend in Arab satellite television advances, content regulations for commercial broadcasters decline. Ibrahim Hamoda stresses the channel's commitment to openness. Furthermore, he denies that the show should even attract censorship. "From the beginning we didn't consider this a shameful subject," he explains. "On the contrary, we saw it as very respectable, not just something that plays on sexual provocation. The idea was to take a respectable lady and let her educate people about this issue—that sex is a gift that God gave us for free."

On a show with a live call-in line, allowing this kind of freedom can be risky, but Hamoda insists that letting people speak at ease is critical: "It really works. The callers speak with total frankness, even about very personal issues." He does admit that from time to time questions have touched on sensitive topics; however, in such instances Dr. Kotb takes censorship into her own hands. She does not hesitate to come down hard on callers practicing activities banned (*haram*) or despised (*makrooh*) in Islam. Hamoda recalled her sharp rebuke to a woman asking about anal sex. "Heba really laid into her," he chuckled. "She isn't going to let anyone get away with making mistakes against Islam." Just because she's talking about sex doesn't mean she's permissive; she has a fine line to tread between encouraging her viewers to enjoy sex and transgressing the restrictions of the Islamic frame which ensures her credibility.

Kotb's advice does not depart from her strict interpretation of Islamic requirements. In her column, she chides a soon-to-be-married youth for implying the possibility of pre-marital experimentation. Instead, she writes, he must sit down with his fiancée shortly before the marriage and consult Quranic passages and Hadith relevant to marital relations. Religious texts are a "catalogue" of sexual advice, she promises. In response to a man's complaining that his circumcised wife could not feel sexual pleasure, Kotb stresses that female circumcision does not prevent women from enjoying sex. She opposes female circumcision since it constitutes "the uprooting of a working organ of the woman's body," but reassures her readers that a "number of nerve endings" can be manipulated to arouse the woman.

In keeping with the methodical, didactic approach of her articles, *Kalaam Kibeer* opens with a lecture from Dr. Heba on the topic of the day. In a speech bursting with scientific detail and Quranic references, Kotb lays out her opinion. Then, she entertains a guest—a "modern" sheikh, professor, or psychologist—whom she interviews about the topic at hand. Next, she listens to cases from a number of call-in "patients" and diagnoses them on the spot. Callers hail from all over the Arab World and beyond, even from America, and they belong to both genders and all age groups. "People face the same problems everywhere," Kotb claims. "I've been to America. The issue is the same: a lack of controlled, *correct* information." In other words, Kotb does not blame the Arab or Islamic traditions for sexual ignorance. Indeed, she sees no contradiction between true Islamic values and laws and scientific fact.

Kotb is not alone in this belief – the reconciling of science with Quranic scripture has preoccupied Muslim scientists since the Middle Ages, and remains a prominent object of discussion today. A research institution called the Center for Islam and Science (CIS) thrives in Canada; the popular online Islamic forum Islamicity provides numerous articles and guidelines for how to incorporate science into an Islamic worldview. What Kotb has done is to take this vibrant strain of modern Islamic thought and use it to gain credibility on the issue that most concerns her: sex.

Kotb must of course grapple with the formidable difficulties posed by Arab society, particularly those concerning women. But she does not merely admonish sexually negligent husbands; she also urges women to take a role in exploring pleasure. “Our society teaches men to seek fulfillment of their sexual desire, which often leads them to treat women as mere tools. Therefore,” she reasons in an episode of *Kalaam Kibeer*, “women must learn to explore their own desires and assert themselves.”

Kotb sees herself as the bearer of a message critical to the health of her society, which she refers to as “the vaccination.” Rather than simply bandage the societal wounds leading to marital unhappiness and unhealthy sexual practices, she hopes to “vaccinate” the new generation by giving them the tools to combat erroneous ideas. “I know how to get the message to these people,” she explains. “I grew up in a very traditional, conservative religious family so I understand where they are coming from.”

Kotb intends to deliver her message solo. She does not attempt to ally herself or associate her message with any other progressive media personalities, such as the businessman-turned-televangelist Amer Khaled or the controversial TV anchor Buthayna Kamel. “I have my message, they have theirs. I am not trying to work with any other TV shows. Buthayna is a good friend, and I have been invited on her show many times. But her message is not Islamic. I needed my own show so I could have a consistent message—not one day Islamic, one day not.”

It’s a hard burden to bear alone, though. “I am only one person,” she emphasizes. “I am doing the best I can, but I could die tomorrow, and then where would we be?”

Although *Kalaam Kibeer* undeniably represents the avant-garde of Islamic sex advice in the media, it has precedent. Thirty years ago, the Egyptian realist film director Salah Abu Seif wrote a script called *Sex School*. The censorship bureau had yet to grant him permission to make the film when he passed away in 1996, so his son Mohamad Abu Seif took up the cause and pushed the project through, under the more neutral title *Al Naama Wal Tawous* (“The Ostrich and the Peacock”).³ The plot: Samira and Hamdi are an unhappy couple, plagued by an empty sex life owing both to Hamdi’s indifference to his wife’s sexual enjoyment and to Samira’s terror of sex after she faced circumcision and molestation in her childhood. Samira then hears of a marital counselor claiming that healthy sex is encouraged by Islam. She visits the spirited Dr. Fatema and eventually convinces her husband to do likewise. This bold, slacks-clad lady proceeds to counteract their misguided ideas about sex, learned from “cheap books” and oppressive cultural

norms. “You are both victims of mistaken values and ideas,” she consoles the couple. “It’s time to fix them!”

Sound familiar? *Al Naama Wal Tawous* was not a huge success, but Dr. Kotb recognizes that the movie’s release increased her visibility. “The media hadn’t picked up on the subject yet, which only happened after *Al Naama Wal Tawous* came out in 2002,” Kotb admitted in an interview with *Egypt Today*.⁴

If a movie boosted Kotb’s business, then *Kalaam Kibeer* has sent it through the roof. But since the 150 LE fee for a clinic visit proves a bit steep for most Egyptians, Dr. Kotb views television as her primary means of spreading the vaccination. “Television is simply the fastest way to spread the message,” Kotb explained in a recent interview. “This way I can plant the idea, the vaccination, in the minds of so many more people.” Furthermore, with television she can bypass two of the largest obstacles to curing what she regards as a sexual illness: ignorance and denial. “People who come to my clinic admit that they have a problem. Most people don’t know that they have a problem, and few would admit it if they did. But if I can broadcast my message into their homes, more will recognize that they are sick, and think about it. And one by one, more Egyptians will have the correct information, and can pass it on to their families and friends.”

Secular Sex Advice: Buthayna Kamel

While Kotb uses her program to broadcast a remedy to societal problems, another talk show host, Buthayna Kamel, endeavors in hers simply to give voice to those problems and lay them bare before the public in all their gruesome detail.

Kamel first went on the air in 1990, with a late-night show on National Egyptian Radio called *I'taraafaat Layliyya* ("Nocturnal Confessions"), in which she received calls from listeners with secrets to confess. "I had heard of call-in shows like this all over the world, and I realized, no one in the Arab World is doing this," said Kamel. "But when I took the idea to the radio administration, they told me, 'This is against our society,' and they worried that this kind of program would soil our reputation." Kamel prevailed however, overcoming opposition at each step of the way to found an award-winning radio show. With a group of journalists, she made a promotional montage of "confessions" to give listeners an idea of what sorts of problems they might address to her: "If you're sitting at home, frustrated, with a heavy heart, and you want someone to listen to you, I am here."

At first, Kamel's audience was unsure about how to respond: "People wanted to know, what does this mean, 'to confess?' This was before the days of satellite, of talk shows, before the spread of opposition, and people weren't used to it." But gradually the show's audience grew, and so did their courage in revealing a disturbing array of social crises to their plucky host. Gruesome they were: a girl raped by her grandfather, another whose husband slept with her sister, dozens trapped in private, unofficial marriages (*gawaaz 'urfi*).

At that time, the show faced constant antagonism from both above and below. “Of course, my show was an Egyptian broadcast,” Kamel emphasizes. “So I had to deal with the three taboos: religion, sex and politics.” Listeners apparently had fewer scruples about these topics; for five years, *Nocturnal Confessions* enjoyed consistent success. But in 1996, it was ordered off the air. According to Kamel, President Mubarak had personally requested the ban.

Although Kamel is also a Muslim, her programs are emphatically secular. “My program is not about religion, it is about personal and social issues. Egypt has many religions, and I view them equally.” However, since Kamel’s show, unlike Kotb’s, does not enjoy the legitimacy and structure of an Islamic frame, she employs greater caution in what she will broadcast. Although she covers such controversial subject matter as female genital mutilation, her liberalism does know bounds. “I censor myself,” Kamel admitted. “For example, I have never covered homosexuality in my program. And I would get many calls from Upper Egypt about Muslims in relationships with Christians. And I felt, I cannot broadcast this. It would lead to sectarian clashes. I was happy to talk to them, but I, Buthayna, did not think that it was in the interest of my country to broadcast it.”

Kamel’s new show, *Argouk Afhamni* (“Please Understand Me”), is broadcast every Thursday and Friday night at 11:30 on Orbit, a Saudi-funded channel. “I have much more freedom on Orbit,” Kamel said. She explained that she faced more detractors in Egypt than elsewhere in the Arab World. “The Egyptian journalists hate me,” she

claimed. “They say I’m ruining Egypt’s reputation.” Slanderous or no, Kamel’s success bears testament to a widespread interest in the Arab World: hearing other voices. Even if one does not have the courage to call, the notion that others may suffer from the same problems provides a shared reassurance. Solving those problems is another battle.

Are they taking the medicine?

The Ostrich and the Peacock makes a clear statement about the lack of sex education in Egypt. As Samira’s mother pins on her wedding veil, she hurriedly assures her daughter that she has given her “the best possible education.” The scene then jumps to the nuptial chamber, where Hamdi rips his terrified bride’s dress apart in brutish haste to perform a deed before practiced only with prostitutes. But do Egyptians believe that Dr. Kotb has correctly diagnosed her society’s disease—that they are in need of sexual help?

Many admit it readily. “It’s awful,” declared Nora, 28, an Egyptian woman who runs her own translation business. “Most mothers tell their daughters nothing at all about sex before their wedding night.” Mona, 45, also recognizes the consequences of failing to educate children about sex.⁵ Forced to support her two young sons and an unemployed husband by working as a maid, she worries obsessively about her children’s education and exposure to corruption. “My mother never even explained to me what menstruation was,” she admitted. “But the relationship of the child and the mother should be strong

enough that the child can tell his or her mother anything. Especially with the spread of pornographic sites, a parent should be very careful about what children hear.”

The abundance of available information on the subject in Egypt has indeed become formidable. While not everyone has access to the Internet, the “cheap books” (derided by the fictional Dr. Fatema) offering information and advice on sex and marriage line displays of street shops from Mohandiseen, an upper-class neighborhood of Cairo, to the sidewalk markets of ‘Ataba, a “*sha‘aby*” or popular area. Such selections as “*Urfi*” *Marriage is Halaal*, penned by an Al Azhar sheikh, Dr. Mustafa ‘Atiyya Mustafa, and *The Secrets of Love, Marriage, Sex, Success, Genius and Happiness*, penned by an unassociated writer, may inspire more giggles than credibility to the Western consumer, but their very existence indicates that sexual advice is in demand.

However, many Egyptian consumers of this advice, whatever its slant may be, still regard sexual information as a liability rather than a benefit. This type of resistance makes it difficult for many to embrace *Kalaam Kibeer*. “I just don’t think Egypt is ready for a show like that,” Mona declared. “Even though of course she is right that the Quran is the best source of information about sex. All Muslims should know that.”

Others do not mince words. “People hate her,” declared Nawal, 27, a Syrian housewife married to an Egyptian. “They think she is against Islam.”

Even some who support the idea of an Islamic sex show expressed reservations about the degree of detail Dr. Kotb sees fit to broadcast on uncensored television. “I agree that we, in the Arab World I mean, need more information about sex,” concedes Mona. “But this is too much for right now. For adults, okay. But people are afraid that if their children hear all of these details too soon, they will be encouraged to try things out.” Although she admitted that scientific, Islamic information was preferable to uncontrolled information over the Internet, she insisted that details in and of themselves were too provocative for an Arab audience. In particular, exposure to such information could be ruinous for girls: “A mother should sit down with her daughter maybe two weeks before the wedding to explain these things, but not before! Otherwise the girl might get curious and experiment, and destroy her honor.”

These are valid reservations in a society that places a high value on sexual purity for unmarried girls, especially in rural areas where “honor killings” still occur with some frequency. Kotb, however, does not hold herself responsible for the make-up of her show’s audience. “Of course the show is not intended for children. Even my youngest daughter understands that it’s not for her and leaves the room when it comes on. But I cannot be in every home to supervise!” The doctor smiles and spreads her hands in contrition. “I cannot be every child’s parent. I have my own children. That is the parents’ responsibility, and it is up to them to decide when their children are ready.” Hamoda agrees. “We broadcast the show at 11:30 p.m. for a reason,” he points out. Convincing parents that they should use *Kalaam Kibeer* to educate their children about sex in the first place may be a stretch. But as the show’s fame grows, this could change.

On the other hand, some find Buthayna Kamel's approach not specific enough. "[Kamel] is not a specialist," complains Dr. Said al-Wakil, a professor at Cairo University, "so she can't really give any helpful advice. Instead, she tends simply to support the values of the society."

Kamel is aware of these criticisms, but shrugs them off: "People accuse me of not being a specialist or a psychologist, of not solving people's problems. I tell them, I am not here to solve problems. These are confessions. I am here to listen."

Moreover, one episode of *I'taraafaat Layliyya* or *Argouk Afhamni* should convince even the greatest skeptic that answering the questions fielded would be a stiff charge no matter what kind of specialist was tackling them. Kamel focuses on encouraging downtrodden women not to blame themselves, not to lose confidence, and not to depend on men. But one has to bear one's audience in mind, Kamel points out. Even those facing life crises due to oppressive societal circumstances cannot change their mentalities on command. "I talk to a lot of people on my show who are uneducated," she reflects. "And if it's a woman working as a maid, or a schoolgirl in a poor neighborhood, I know her mentality won't change. I can't say, 'get out of there and go get a PhD.'"

Kotb's show could perhaps benefit from similar considerations. Some seem to find the show's content too academic. Nawal admitted that "she is doing a great thing and

the show is very daring, but you should ask my mother-in-law about this instead . . . she's a *muthaqqaf* (an intellectual) and understands these things better than I do."

These criticisms suggest *Kalaam Kibeer*'s producers may need to re-imagine the show to influence a wider audience. Certainly the novelty of a female Islamic sex doctor has undeniable attraction; but novelty in and of itself is not necessarily an advantage. If indeed the goal is to "change the culture," one must consider the interests of a wider public. As long as it remains within an Islamic frame, the show could probably stand to be less academic and retain its credibility. Despite the flashing "caution" signs, *Kalaam Kibeer* remains quite tame. Although the mere spectacle of a Muslim lady tittering over a nervous groom struggling to keep "a strong, sustained erection" on his wedding night may suffice for many, it may take more creativity to make *Kalaam Kibeer* a household name.

Kotb does plan improvements for the upcoming season of *Kalaam Kibeer*. She hopes to streamline the various strains of her sex education into segments corresponding to the curricula she uses in her clinic. "This way I can give clearer, more accessible lessons," she explains. Hamoda says that the next season will also make use of satellite technology to have video interviews with specialists from around the world. Both of these enhancements could give the show a snappier, more accessible feel, and its popularity is likely to grow.

Hamoda remains optimistic. “Egypt is so huge, it’s the best place to try things out,” he says. “Even the lowest rating in Egypt still means you are reaching half a million people!” And *Kalaam Kibeer* has far surpassed the lowest rungs, as it places consistently second or third for its time slot throughout Egypt according to Hamoda. “It’s worth it, even for one viewer who picks up the receiver and calls us,” Hamoda declares. “And my opinion is that one equals ten. If you see us, and you tell your friend, who tells her friend . . . It could take a long time, but I believe in this show. I believe in the message.”

Kotb also sets her goals high. Not only does she want to cure as many “patients” as possible; she hopes to encourage other Egyptians to become sexologists. Since her show went on the air, this has begun to happen more quickly; Kotb claims that many viewers have contacted her to find out where they can study sexology.

So even if a show like Kotb’s cannot “change the culture” overnight, it has at least presented an opportunity for change. Moreover, shows like *Kalaam Kibeer* and *Argouk Afhamni* indicate that Arabic media increasingly foster such opportunities. And watching the steady stream of couples pour into Dr. Kotb’s office and pore over *Lil Kubaar Faqat* while awaiting their turn for sexual healing, one cannot help but believe that a domino has been pushed.

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¹ See Dr. Heba Kotb's column (in Arabic) in the *Al Ahrām* Archives via her website <http://www.hebakotb.net/>. *Lil Kubaar Faqat* is also available in Arabic from *Halaa li-nnashar wa at-towzi'*.

² Naila Hamdy (2002). "El Mehwar The Mercurial," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No. 9, Fall/Winter.

³ "Egyptians lift curtain on sex film." *AP*:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/04/03/1017206222206.html>. April 4 2002.

⁴ Manal el-Jesri. "Heba Qutb: Meet the counselor who's not afraid to talk about sex for a living." *Egypt Today*. October 2004.

⁵ Mona, while working at my apartment, has become a friend as well.