

**Carolin Emcke**

**How we Desire**

*Wie wir begehren*

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Translated by Ruth Martin

These days I often travel around countries where the circles of my childhood are still being drawn. I move around areas where divisions and separations according to gender and sexuality are repeated and confirmed - these unspoken codes and conventions that delimit the terrain in which you can speak, live, love. They are other circles and other boundaries, they are coloured by culture, overwritten by religion, but these different hues change nothing about the structure of exclusion or limitation, about these inner spaces that are made to fit outer lines, about the inexpressible nature of the spaces between, the invisibility of the people who inhabit them.

During my last trip to Gaza, I wanted to go to a part of Gaza City largely inhabited by followers of Islamic Jihad. That day, two Palestinian women had been released from Israeli prisons; they had already had the official reception from Hamas, and were about to arrive at their family homes. Everything was prepared: the men gathered in the street outside the house, the older ones perching on plastic chairs, the younger ones standing on the pavement. Triumphant music boomed from huge, black loudspeakers; photos of the homecomer were displayed in the entryway; the staircase was covered in brightly-coloured balloons. But however martial the symbolism in the public space, inside, in private, everything was bathed in childhood, in pink-coloured joy; while the men saw a heroine of the resistance returning home, the women saw her first and foremost as the daughter, the niece, the sister.

My translator, Hala, was a young, bare-headed Palestinian woman with shoulder-length black hair. This has become a rare sight in Gaza. Over the last few years since Hamas took power, women without veils have almost completely vanished from the streets. Very few still venture out bare-headed in public; the robes, dresses and coats are becoming longer, and a headscarf alone is no longer sufficient: the *niqab*, a black face-veil, in combination with a *chador*, a long cloak, has become the norm, especially in a part of town largely inhabited by followers of the radical Islamic Jihad.

Usually I take a length of cloth with me, a shawl, something I can cover my hair with if necessary, when politeness demands it. It never works properly; an unruly tuft of hair always sticks out. Covering my head is a way of being considerate and fitting in, a quotation of the norm that regularly misfires. For that reason, I sometimes wear a little close-fitting hat under the veil to prevent my hair from doing what it likes, which spares me the endless adjustments and fumbling around with it. The fact that my little hat looks suspiciously like the head-

covering worn by men in Muslim countries makes the combination of hat and scarf even more curious.

Don't we need veils? I asked Hala, a little unsure as to whether it wouldn't be especially impolite to appear before these pious residents with our heads uncovered, particularly on a day of celebration such as this. No problem, Hala replied cheerfully, after all, you're here with me. That wasn't my question. I hadn't just been thinking about her, but about myself. Instead, she thought my presence excused her unconventionality. In any case, it was too late: we were already in the passageway outside the front door, in a crush of people going in and out and regarding the two of us, who were neither bearded nor veiled, with astonishment.

We were to be allowed inside. The women in the inner courtyard looked like a dark mass, indistinguishable from each other in their black robes, shapeless, bodyless, a billowing wall of cloth, impenetrable, with no hair, no faces, no large areas of skin - people made of eyes and hands, and everything in motion. As convention demanded, Hala enquired her way through the crowd to the lady of the house, Ahlam, to find out if I might be allowed to speak to her. She introduced me, but as I put out my hand to take hers under her *chador*, she suddenly flinched. I missed her hand, and mine slipped upwards and touched her elbow, which was covered in black cloth. It was an uncomfortable moment. Unsuccessful greetings are almost as embarrassing as failed farewells. But the place was so full and bustling, someone somewhere was always pushing, and it was no wonder two hands failed to find each other. We went up the stairs, past countless women carrying plastic carafes of syrup or trays of sugared tea in small glasses for the guests standing around on the staircase or in the street.

Upstairs, Ahlam finally stopped beside a group of women. Soon they had all surrounded me and, standing in a semi-circle, we were able to talk. What had previously looked like a black mass now fanned out to reveal distinct shapes, individuals, pairs of eyes. They talked animatedly, interrupting each other, telling me about their life in Gaza. They explained their attitude to Hamas, to Islamic Jihad, to Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who at that time was still imprisoned in Gaza and had become a sorry bargaining chip in negotiations between the Israeli government and Hamas. They felt sympathy for the mother of the young Israeli; they were able to put themselves in her shoes – after all, they had been frightened for their own children in Israeli captivity. As we were standing talking like this, always with a delay and through the wires of Hala's translation, they suddenly started to giggle. Hala had stopped translating, and was now speaking to them directly, seemingly about me.

“They want to know if you're a boy or a girl...” Hala explained, a little sheepishly. All the pairs of eyes were staring at me with rapt attention, waiting for my reaction. They were afraid of having offended me with the question, but they were even more curious to know the answer.

I like questions like these. They are seldom asked at home. Open questions are swallowed, disguised, repressed by a normalised acceptance, and our concern about saying anything too close to the bone stops us getting close to anything at all. The enlightened heterosexual

majority claims to be tolerant, even though there is nothing to tolerate; some people take great pride in their friendships with homosexuals, and yet never talk about what friends actually talk about: sex. Many paint themselves as understanding, though they understand very little, because they don't dare ask. Curiosity, the discovery of difference, the exploration of what we have in common, but also our differences, all vanish beneath the heavy cloak of benign tolerance, which prefers everything left vague, prefers to tolerate the unknown rather than find an acquaintance frighteningly attractive or repellent, comprehensible or incomprehensible, surprising or boring. This way, homosexuals can exist as a monolithic block; this way, the group will never fan out like the women behind the veils, to reveal individual faces and experiences.

“They want to know if you're a boy or a girl...”

I also like these questions because to me they seem serious and in no way insulting. The sensitivity with which some people react to questions about their sexuality is unknown to me. As if any question about their sexual orientation was an insult in itself, and above all, as if any question about this desire was easy to answer, as if it was clear, closed, beyond doubt, as if desire didn't change and enlarge again and again, as if it could be controlled, knocked into shape, forced into a particular direction, as if there was no justification for asking about why we love one way or another, what makes the difference, when we first knew, if we were sure about it...

“Ask them what I look like to them.” I watched as Hala translated my words into Arabic, then they all started speaking at once, and Hala had to wait until they had come to an agreement, before translating: “You're wearing trousers, and you have short hair, and that looks like a boy, but when you laugh and when you talk, then you're clearly a girl.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Not only to reassure them that I had not taken offence at their doubts, but because it was a lovely description and I recognised myself in it. Only then did I realise what had happened with the greeting earlier. Ahlam hadn't accidentally pulled her hand away; she had taken me for a boy - and what else was she supposed to think of someone with short hair. She didn't reject short-haired women; she just had no idea that women *could* have short hair. The idea that my appearance might be *one* aesthetic possibility for women was unthinkable – it was not in the realm of the possible, not in the realm of what was possible for her. I had to be a man. When I put out my hand, she had been afraid that I, a man, was going to touch her, and that was forbidden.

The story of the women in Gaza makes it clear that words are not the only things that depend on how they are used; it's also norms and conventions, symbols and gestures. We are all too quick to assume that the reluctance to shake my hand, the question of whether I am “a boy or a girl” has something to do with moral or ideological condemnation. But the women didn't reject me as a woman - they just didn't *recognise* me as a woman. It was a question of understanding, not ideology. They didn't know any women who had short hair and wore

trousers. None of the symbolic and aesthetic codes of femininity were visible in me; they couldn't perceive me as a woman.

In the eighties, when everything about Sicilian life and culture was dominated by the Mafia, long before fearless lawyers and police officers started taking action against the cartels, a member of the Mafia presented himself to the local police in Palermo: he wanted to make a statement. He wanted to give himself up, talk about all the crimes he had knowledge of and cooperate with the authorities. The inspectors placed this genuine Mafioso in a psychiatric institution - anyone who claimed he wanted to make a statement against the Mafia must be mad. It wasn't an act of repression, this course of action; they truly believed he was out of his mind. This is how ideologies work, but it's also just how the worlds we live in work - not just in Gaza, but in Paderborn or Palermo: they establish rules and ideas; they create practices and convictions that everyone perceives as natural - given, not created. They construct boundaries that may not be crossed: boundaries of reason, of shame, boundaries in clothing, boundaries in haircuts, which everyone perceives as self-evident and the only possibility.

I considered whether I should explain to her that, as a man, I would never have tried to shake her hand, that of course I wouldn't have wanted to overstep her accustomed boundary of shame. Maybe at the same time she was considering whether she should explain to me that of course she would have shaken hands with me, as a woman, that she would never have shied away from my touch.

Neither of us said anything.

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When I was at school, religion was a very clear-cut matter. There were no Muslims in my class. We were split into roughly equal groups of Protestants and Catholics. And there was also one Jewish boy. For the compulsory religious studies lessons during our first years at secondary school, before we were able to choose between philosophy and religion, the Protestants had to go to the entirely atheist theologian on the teaching staff, who regarded religious studies as literary studies. The Catholics, meanwhile, had to go to the priest from the local Catholic Church, who regarded religious studies as catechism, and the Jewish boy had a free period and was allowed to go to the Italian ice-cream parlour. But since we were split into groups, for a long time no one noticed there was a Jew. The Protestants thought he was Catholic, and the Catholics thought he was Protestant. And so no one missed him, or thought of him as being special.

No boundaries were drawn by our religious denomination. More important was whether you joined the modern or ancient languages stream. From the seventh grade the class divided, supposedly according to our interest in languages, but actually according to our parents' class and level of education: one successful generation produced the next. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but I would be very surprised if anyone who didn't come from an educated, middle-class household had chosen the ancient languages option.

Cutter sailing or tennis were markers of another social order. The boys who went cutter sailing on the river often sat together on the beach at the weekends talking, sometimes with a game of football in the sand added to the sailing programme. They dreamed of becoming ship-builders or making a round-the-world sailing trip, and they smelled bolder and more exciting than the other boys, whose adventurousness was limited to the red dust on their white tennis shoes.

I wanted to go camping with Jakob, one of the cutter-sailing boys from the river. It was an orange tent that we put up at the bottom of the garden, on the edge of the woods: Jakob, Markus and me. My mother thought it perfectly normal that I would want to spend the night in a tent with two boys from school, and we thought it perfectly normal too, until that night the three of us rolled around on the floor of the tent, and I hugged and kissed first one and then the other, and sometimes both at once, and let both of them kiss me, before I finally decided on Jakob and we touched each other, almost limply, because we wanted so much, and helplessly too, because we had no idea what we actually wanted, or how to want, and which caresses might give the other one pleasure and if that was really what we wanted: to give pleasure. It just came over us. Maybe it was more curiosity than lust, more excitement than desire: it excited us to feel this nakedness, to feel our way along the other person's skin, not just the places that were usually covered by clothes, but all of their skin, to feel our way along their body, discovering everything, all the troughs and crannies, all the places of the body that had no names, and couldn't be spoken, but nevertheless existed, in the dark, and could nevertheless be touched. I moved as if on the ice floes in the river, fearful lest the ice give way beneath me. I tried to make myself light - with every stroke of my fingers, every movement that brought me closer to the forbidden place, I listened inwardly for any hint of a crack that could open up and pull me under. Eventually I moved over completely into Jakob's sleeping bag, and stayed there.

The next morning we were scared and just as speechless as the night before, only during the night we hadn't really thought about it. Now the fear of discovery spread like sand; it trickled into the spaces between us, closed gaps, glued up openings, dimmed our sight and made it hard to swallow. We weren't clear exactly what had happened, but the morning after it suddenly felt like something that had gone too far, like something that had not been envisaged - and that was accurate inasmuch as we had evidently touched each other as far as we dared, but we would have dared to go even further, had we known how.

The boundaries of lust were still the boundaries of our imagination. We simply had no idea what was supposed to happen afterwards. Our hands, our lips had no experience, but that wasn't even the worst thing; we also had no idea, we couldn't picture what we might want. Or maybe that's not true. Maybe at that moment, back then, the boundaries of lust were also the boundaries of desire. Maybe we just weren't yet sufficiently driven by desire, maybe it was more a voyage of discovery, maybe we were driven more by curiosity than lust. Maybe.