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*Homosexuality in Islam:
A Difficult Paradox*

Nicole Kligerman '10

This paper addresses the complex intricacies of homosexuality in Islam by exploring Qur'anic notions of sexuality, theoretical perceptions of homosexuality in the Muslim world, the effect of Western influences on sexuality, and human rights abuses inflicted upon Muslim gays today.

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Introduction

Historical and contemporary homosexuality in Islam both demonstrate a paradoxical reality. While it is a common Western perception that contemporary Muslim societies are particularly repressive of gays, this has not always been the case. In fact, it is partly the rise of Western influence in the Muslim world that has created a greater social stigma against homosexuality. Although the Qur'an dismisses homosexuality entirely, Muslims have a complex relationship to same-sex sexual behavior that deserves to be comprehensively explored. This paper addresses the intricacies of homosexuality and same-gender sex in Islam by exploring Qur'anic notions of sexuality, theoretical perceptions of homosexuality in the Muslim world, the effect of Western influences on sexuality, and human rights abuses inflicted upon Muslim gays today.

Islamic Law and Homosexuality

The Qur'an is very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, with very few loopholes with which to theologically condone gays in Islam. In the Qur'an, homosexuals are referred to as *qaum Lut* (Lot's people), referring to the prophet Lut (known as Lot in the Christian Bible) who preached against homosexuality in the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, which were subsequently destroyed. In the Qur'an, Lut questions, "How can you lust for males, of all creatures in the world, and leave those whom God has created for you as your mates? You are really going beyond all limits" (26:165-

166).³⁹ The Prophet Muhammad adds, “Doomed by God is who does what Lot’s people did [ie homosexuality].”⁴⁰

The Prophet also comments that, “No man should look at the private parts of another man, and no woman should look at the private parts of another woman, and no two men sleep [in bed] under one cover, and no two women sleep under one cover.”⁴¹ In his last speech, known as the “Farewell Sermon”, the Prophet added a last condemnation of homosexuality, saying, “Whoever has intercourse with a woman and penetrates her rectum, or with a man, or with a boy, will appear on the Last Day stinking worse than a corpse; people will find him unbearable until he enters hell fire, and God will cancel all his good deeds.”⁴²

The Qur’an declares Islam to be the “religion of nature” and, similar to Judaism, promotes sex by making it a sacred act with a prayer asking Allah to “grant me a righteous child” before sex. The Qur’an further encourages sex by outlawing celibacy and permitting polygamy, thus reinforcing heteronormative sexual behavior. Since the purpose of sex is procreation according the religious text, homosexuality is seen as an aberration of Allah’s will which threatens Muslims with extinction. As a result, there is officially no room for homosexuality or homosexuals within Islam.⁴³

Scholars of shari’a, Islamic law, interpret homosexuality to be not merely a sin, but a crime as well. Despite this, there is no specific punishment for homosexuality; instead, the decision is left to the discretion of the ruling authorities. Shari’a encourages those accused of homosexuality to repent instead of confessing to the “crime”. This phenomenon can potentially explain the paucity of historical literature of punishment of sexual transgressions.⁴⁴ “Islamic law stands for privacy and protects it by all means. Besides, it repeatedly emphasizes that a person is innocent until proven guilty without any doubt, and

³⁹ Duran 182

⁴⁰ Ibid 182

⁴¹ Ibid 182

⁴² Ibid 182

⁴³ Ibid 183

⁴⁴ Ibid 184

everyone should have the benefit of the slightest doubt.”⁴⁵ Therefore the jurisprudence laid out in Islamic law also aids those accused of being gay.

Muslim Homosexuals

In “medieval Islamic societies, sex is organized in conformity to principles of social and political hierarchy.”⁴⁶ It was not uncommon in this kinship-based society to have homosexual patterns based on both “transgenerational systems with ritualized or initiatory systems between youths and adults” and transgenderist systems where one partner assumes the role of the opposite gender.⁴⁷ Therefore, homosexual relationships reinforced dominant and subordinated roles already present in society. Homosexual relationships followed traditional gender and power patterns; boys played the passive role (emulating the woman), while adult males asserted their power by receiving sexual pleasure through domination. Egalitarian sexual roles, however, were seen as “inexplicable and unacceptable.”⁴⁸ During the Middle Period, upper class men often had young males who played the passive role in the relationship, supporting this notion of the inherent subordination of the woman’s traditional role.⁴⁹ Particularly in Morocco, it was seen as equal to have a young male sex partner as it was to have a young girl; male prostitution was also common. Even in contemporary Morocco, homosexuality between a man and a youth carries little social stigma; it is viewed as both natural and an expression of dominance and power.⁵⁰

A medieval medical treatise attributed to Ar-Razi, “Treatise on the Hidden Illness,” attempts to explain the “hidden illness” of *ubnah*, or passive homosexuality. Ar-Razi describes *ubnah* as being derived from weak male sperm that makes the male child effeminate. To combat *ubnah*, Ar-Razi

⁴⁵ Fathi ‘Uthmán

⁴⁶ Dunne 1998, 8

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 1990, 2

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 1998, 10

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 1990, 3

⁵⁰ Dunne 1990, 4

prescribes engaging in sexual activity with “maids and slaves with nice faces.”⁵¹ Although Ar-Razi himself apologizes at the end of his writing for having addressed the issue and other medieval writings poke fun at *ubnah*, Ar-Razi’s treatise nevertheless demonstrates that homosexuality was viewed as a natural, genetic phenomenon.

Because of the specific outlawing of homosexuality, there are very few self-proclaimed gays in Muslim societies today. However, this is not to say that there are not people who actively engage in same-sex sexual acts. Upholding the appearance of family is of the utmost importance, and so long as one maintains the image of a good father and husband (complete with a wife—or wives—and children), many Muslims do not concern themselves with what goes on behind others’ closed doors.⁵² This has led Muslim homosexual men to marry heterosexual Muslim women to adhere to the appearance of social norms, actions that are cited by Western human rights groups as a human rights abuse.⁵³

Known homosexuals were tolerated in public office if they continue to publicly live a heterosexual lifestyle. For instance, Sultan Mehmet Fatif, Ottoman conqueror of Constantinople and Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi, who invaded India from Afghanistan, are both important historical figures and known gays. Both men had several wives and children. While Westerners would view these men—and those like them—as bisexual, Muslims view them as consistent with *shari’a*; they maintained an outwardly conforming appearance in terms of familial and public life but happened to engage in homosexual activity.

However, while traditional Muslim societies may tolerate homosexuals in public office, gays are vehemently rejected in the role of teachers or religious role models. This coincides with the importance of marriage and family in Islam; unmarried people are usually not accepted into these positions either. Again, homosexuality (and not being married, thus not

⁵¹ Ibid 1990, 3

⁵² Duran 190

⁵³ Ibid 190

producing children) is seen as a breach of the “religion of nature.”

The 1986 murder of professor Isma'il Al Faruqi and his wife Lois provide a prime example of Western misunderstanding of the Muslim homosexual paradox. Of Palestinian descent, Al Faruqi taught Islamics in Philadelphia and was killed by one of his students—a Muslim convert—who claimed that the Faruqis “forced Muslim students to perform homosexual acts in return for scholarships at Temple University.”⁵⁴ Irrespective of the validity of his claim, this demonstrates the students' lack of understanding of the subtleties of Islamic teachings regarding homosexuality. While the student had learned about the Qur'an's rejection of homosexuality, as a Westerner he failed to understand that despite the shari'a's dismissal, homosexuality is largely permitted when it is not openly displayed.⁵⁵

In the Muslim world, it is common to engage in homosexual activity without being considered gay if one is the active partner in the act. “In Turkey, Egypt and the Maghreb, men who are ‘active’ in sexual relations with other men are not considered homosexual; the sexual domination of other men even confers a status of hyper-masculinity.”⁵⁶ It is common in the Maghreb for schoolboys to brag about what sexual act they will perform to their male peers, especially those that are perceived as weak and passive. Whereas in some other languages slang terms for homosexuals only connote “effeminate” (such as the word *maricón* in Spanish), the “Arabic terms *maful* (‘the passive partner’) or *zamil* are common abuses and have the connotation ‘characterless’, ‘depraved’, [or] ‘opportunistic.’⁵⁷ Homosexual rape is also a very powerful and often-utilized humiliation tool. Repressive regimes, like those in Iran and Pakistan, use homosexual rape on political opponents as a policy of repression. This tactic is often seen as more

⁵⁴ Duran 191

⁵⁵ Duran 191

⁵⁶ Dunne 1998, 10

⁵⁷ Duran 187

politically effective than killing people, as it denies people of their manhood.⁵⁸

Of the varying and distinct cultures of the Muslim world, some are seen as having more open and pronounced homosexual identities. Persians are particularly known for expressing their gay tendencies, e.g., Iranian poetry contains many explicit and implicit homosexual references. Conversely, Andalusian poetry has scant references to homosexuality and traditional Moorish culture has few allusions to a gay culture.⁵⁹

Despite this, there is a frequent occurrence of “emergency homosexuality” in all of the diverse Muslim communities. Since boys and girls are separated until marriage according to Islamic tradition, opportunities for premarital sexual experiences remain scant. As a result, both males and females often have same-sex relationships. In some societies, like in Morocco, boys often use bestiality (with female donkeys) as their sexual outlet. This tendency traditionally ends at marriage, which takes place for girls between ages 13 and 16 and for boys occurs from ages 17 to 20.⁶⁰

However, the rising trend of delayed marriage—today, many people get married in their 30s or 40s—and of educated Muslim women not getting married at all may result in an increase in homosexual relationships. However, homosexual practice is an effect, not a cause, of the decline in marriage in Muslim communities.⁶¹ Another factor that could increase the rate of homosexual activity among women is that ten million Muslim men from throughout the Muslim world have migrated to Europe seeking work.⁶² While this decline in males may result in an increase in “emergency homosexuality,” it is doubtful that statistics will be available as outward homosexuality remains taboo.

Muslim Homosexual Interaction with the West

⁵⁸ Ibid 188

⁵⁹ Ibid 185

⁶⁰ Duran 185

⁶¹ Ibid 186

⁶² Ibid 192

Gay and feminist theories claim that sexual categories (heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality) are not universal. They contend that the term “homosexual” only refers to people who define themselves in this specific sexual orientation, not to those who engage in same-sex sexual behavior. This certainly holds true in the Muslim world.⁶³ In the pre-colonial Muslim world, which includes Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, Black Africans and Indians, sex between two males was quite common, but those who engaged in such behavior did not define themselves as gay. While Westerners who traveled to these areas in the 17th and 18th centuries were scandalized by (or admired) the seeming openness of sodomy in these regions, homosexuality in those community and Western homosexuality are fundamentally different.⁶⁴ “The distinction made by modern Western ‘sexuality’ between sexual and gender identity, that is, between kinds of sexual predilections [and] degrees of masculinity and femininity, has, until recently, had little resonance in the Middle East.”⁶⁵

The rise in Western colonialism in the Middle East and larger Muslim world correlated with the increasing stigma against homosexuality. The destruction of the kinship-based community, stemming from the rise of capitalism and the male wage-work force reinforced the patriarchal, heterosexual family unit. As state governments fostered such a change, the stigma against homosexuality increased.⁶⁶ “The concept of homosexuality as defining a particular type person and a category of ‘deviance came to the Middle East [through the agency] of the West” as well.⁶⁷ Until Western influence, homosexuality did not carry a negative connotation in the Muslim world. The change in community structure and the rising influence of Western perceptions thus largely created the contemporary taboo against homosexuality in Muslim societies.

⁶³ Dunne 1990, 2

⁶⁴ Ibid 1990, 12

⁶⁵ Ibid 1998, 6

⁶⁶ Ibid 1990, 3

⁶⁷ Ibid 1990, 12

“Hostility to homosexual practices has been part of the political and cultural legacy of European colonialism.”⁶⁸

Most contemporary Muslims, not just Islamist fundamentalists, view homosexuality as a byproduct of increased Westernization. Because of this view, many people are not concerned with protecting the rights of the gay minority. Further increasing difficulty for gays in the Muslim world are European and American gay converts to Islam. Many of these people come to the religion mistakenly believing that Muslims will be more tolerant of their sexual identify, an erroneous assumption that has led to a decrease in human rights for gay, natural-born Muslims.⁶⁹ Western gay sex tourists who frequent North Africa and Kenya, among other places, are seen by the local communities as wealthy and decadent “haves”, causing resentment by the indigenous “have-nots”. As the Western homosexual minority demands equality, the heterosexual majority increasingly view gays as overindulgent and demanding more privileges than heterosexuals receive. This serves to increase resentment, thus decreasing human rights and acceptance of homosexuality.⁷⁰

Western homosexuals seeking sexual pleasure in Arab countries typically do not realize the psychological impact Arabs may derive from sodomizing a Westerner. These sexual acts are seen as taking revenge on an imperial aggressor, a former “subject race” exacting retribution on a dominant power.⁷¹ Thus, the willingness of some Muslims to have sex with a Westerner can be attributed partly to hostility and rage.

Despite this, some Arabs do cater to potential sex tourists through websites such as GayEgypt.com, which advertises the best places to meet men in Egypt as well as teaches phrases in Arabic about how to “flatter your handsome Egyptian boyfriend” and “essential chat-up lines for the gay tourist.”⁷² On the first page of the website, however, there is a

⁶⁸ Dunne 1998, 11

⁶⁹ Duran 186

⁷⁰ Ibid 187

⁷¹ Ibid 189

⁷² Gayegypt.com

news bulletin from December 11, 2006 which warns of a video of Egyptian police sodomizing a bus driver with a broomstick as the man begs "Sorry, pasha. Sorry."⁷³ This is an ominous warning to sex tourists and Muslim homosexuals alike of the dangers gays face in the Muslim world.

Human rights abuses of gays in Muslim World

Human rights abuses of homosexuals are very prevalent in Muslim societies. Most Muslim countries have laws against homosexuality and in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen those convicted are punished with death. Other countries have penalties that range from a maximum of three years imprisonment to life in prison.⁷⁴ Regardless of the varying sentences, homosexuality is not condoned in any Muslim country..

The Queen Boat affair on May 11, 2001 infamously exposed the human rights abuses inflicted on Egyptian homosexuals. Over 50 men arrested on the floating disco the Queen Boat were beaten and tortured by Egyptian police. The Queen Boat 52 (as the 52 men who were held were dubbed by the press), were also accused by the press of "sexual excesses, dressing as women, devil worship, [and] even dubious links to Israel...Front pages carried the men's photographs, not always with black bars across their eyes."⁷⁵ After that incident, agents from the Department for Protection of Morality in Egypt "began monitoring suspected gay gathering spots, recruiting informants, luring people to arrest via chat sites on the Internet, tapping phones, raiding homes. Today, arrests and roundups occur throughout the country."⁷⁶

Other infamous cases of human rights abuses include the execution of hundreds of political opponents on the grounds of homosexuality after Ayatollah Khomeini gained power in Iran in 1979.⁷⁷ In another case in Iran, two teenagers, Mahmoud

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Azimi 64

⁷⁶ Ibid 64

⁷⁷ Duran 194

Asgari and Ayaz Morhoni, were publicly hanged in July 2005 for having a homosexual relationship.⁷⁸ Despite a minute gay subculture in cities like Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul, homosexuals face harassment by policies and “outing” to their communities. “Many homosexuals in Middle Eastern countries have sought asylum in the West as refugees from official persecution.”⁷⁹

An obstacle that a potential gay rights movement will encounter in combating these human rights abuses is the prevailing view that the movement is not indigenous, but rather a Western-imposed ideal that is not in line with traditional societies. Joseph Massad, a Palestinian born professor of Arab politics at Columbia University, argues that it is the work of organizations like the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC)—which he dubs the “Gay International”—that inadvertently causes these human rights violations by projecting their Western notions of sexuality on the Muslim world. Like gay and feminist theorists, Massad claims that gay rights are not universal, and by attempting to assert the human rights of supposed “homosexuals” who do not self-identify as such, the Gay International puts Muslims who engage in homosexual activity in the position of defending themselves to their increasingly repressive governments.⁸⁰ “The Gay International is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image.”⁸¹ The work of such groups thus not only threatens any potential fledgling home-grown gay rights movement, but increases governmental repression on homosexuality by exposing a gay population in the Muslim world that, due to its enormous differences from the Western concept of gayness, does not want to be identified.

Looking Toward the Future

⁷⁸ Wikipedia

⁷⁹ Dunne 1998, 11

⁸⁰ Massad 384

⁸¹ Ibid 385

Thus far, there have been no significant advances toward gay rights in the Muslim world. One reason for this is that, with the myriad of problems that the region is facing, protecting a small group of minorities is not seen as a priority.⁸² Similarly, Muslim human rights advocates—already put in a precarious situation with the rise of Islamist fundamentalists—are not willing to compromise their credibility by advocating for an issue that will not be greeted well by the public or governments. Waving the flag of gay rights would also detract from their advocacy for political and religious pluralism.⁸³ However, for gays to achieve more rights within Muslim communities non-gays will also have to champion their cause, further decreasing the prospects for a real gay movement to materialize in the near future. Change for homosexuals will come when profound changes have reached the Muslim world.⁸⁴

⁸² Duran 192

⁸³ Ibid 195

⁸⁴ Duran 193

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