The normal and the abnormal: treading a moral sexual path in a postcolonial context

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Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to offer a brief analysis and some insights into sexual diversity in contemporary Muslim discourse. I will focus on the nexus between sexual diversity, secularism and empire as sites of contestation and collaboration that continue to influence articulations and constructions of how to be Muslim and be part of a sexual minority. My purpose is not to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive examination of the issues at hand but rather I hope to demonstrate some of the challenges facing contemporary sexual ethics and its relationship to power as well as to initiate some pertinent questions about the colonial and postcolonial legacies of our current sexual economy. In doing so, my aim is not to delve into theological and religious debates and pronouncements on the permissibility and appropriateness of same-sex sexual desire and conduct; rather my intention is to think

1 Nadeem Mahomed obtained BA and LLB degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He was admitted as an attorney of the High Court of South Africa and is currently a MA candidate in Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg.
2 This is part of a larger project that analyses three other focal points in the discussion on sexual diversity and Islam: the evolution and representation of sexual acts and identities; Islamic law and same-sex sexual conduct; and alternatives to religious legal legitimisation. For a discussion and overview of these issues see Esack and Mahomed (2011).
through the framework within which sexual diversity was constructed during the colonial period and how it is talked about currently in relation to politics and society.

**Good or bad sex: colonialism, modernity, religion and sex**

Ahmed Ali’s classic novel *Twilight in Delhi* is a nostalgic tale set in nineteenth-century Delhi between two revolutionary moments: subsequent to the collapse of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, and prior to the rise of the independence movement which culminated in the violent partition of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. In the novel, Ali depicted a scene after early morning prayers on the day of Eid at the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. He wrote:

> When the prayer ended they all began to embrace, falling on each other’s necks, pressing the chests together warmly. All those who knew one another went through this show and expression of affection. And the lovers found the opportunity of their lives. A middle-aged man quoted these lines to a young man with arms open for an embrace:

> ‘It is the day of Eed, my dear,  
> Ah come, let me embrace thee.  
> It is the custom and besides  
> There’s time and opportunity …’ (Ali 1940: 95)

Ali, in his novel, depicted most movingly and melancholically the loss of a culture and way of life in the city of Delhi as it was altered by the rebellion of 1857. He presented this moment as a vestige of a pre-modern cultural Indo-Islamic milieu that was in the process of a traumatic disruption at the hands of colonialism. The above incident, although of a literary nature, demonstrates that a context and environment for the expression of same-sex attraction and love existed in Muslim societies.
Two distinct issues seem to be commonly discussed in relation to homosexuality and Muslim societies: (1) the existence, culture and toleration of homoeroticism in Muslim cultures; and (2) the religious prohibition of same-sex desire and sexual conduct and its impact on the agency and freedom of people who experience and/or act upon such desires.

The argument that the failure of Muslims and/or Islam to deal adequately and Progressively with homosexuality compared to other faiths, particularly Christianity and Judaism, is due to its failure to come to terms with secularism (Whitaker 2006: 179–180) fails to consider seriously whether the pre-modern attitude towards sexuality has anything to offer our current engagement with such issues. Secularism is made normative by centralising it as the core of modern society. Talal Asad articulated the normative secular thesis as: ‘in order for a society to be modern it has to be secular and for it to be secular it has to relegate religion to non-political spaces because that arrangement is essential to modern society’ (2003: 182). In this sense, secularism is not simply the cultivation of a space emancipated from the fetters of religion (Asad 2003: 191) but also a mechanism that regulates the use and normative face of religious discourse and practice (Mahmood 2006). Some Muslim academics argue for a positive acceptance of such a secular framework, suggesting that Islamic jurisprudence should be sufficiently malleable to cater for liberal western democratic contingencies that affect sexual minorities (Kugle 2010: 3, 185, 188) and should be considered within a wider framework of universal human rights (Habib 2010: xxii). Integral to these claims is the notion that ‘mainstream’ Islam requires a reformation that will assist both Muslims and institutions of the faith to come to terms with and accept the legitimacy of sexual diversity (Habib 2010: xxvi, 270–271).

A few comments are necessary here. The secular project together with its earlier precursor, modernity, inflicted a severe trauma on pre-modern Muslim societies. The civilising mission of colonial powers sought to reconstruct a Muslim subject that was both acquiescent to the colonial order and imbued the mores and moral sensibilities of his or her European overlord.

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3 Earlier writings on Islam and homosexuality tended to focus on this question. See Schmitt and Sofer (1992); Murray and Roscoe (1997); Wright and Rowson (1997).
British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent imposed an assault on homoerotic poetry and the homosocial culture of Muslim India which was also prevalent in many other Muslim contexts (Kugle 2001: 37). During the nineteenth century, the period in which Ali’s novel is set, modern homophobia developed in colonial India and was cultivated by an array of mechanisms including laws, educational policies and rewriting indigenous literature, particularly Persian-Urdu poetry. This is not to suggest that there was no discrimination or societal disapproval of same-sex desire and sexual conduct in pre-modern India under Muslim rule, but what seems evident is that a homophobia that was somewhat marginalised and perhaps not very effective in pre-colonial India became dominant particularly among the educated and urban classes who were integrated into the colonial administration. This development was a result of a European puritanism and in this instance the ethical code of Victorian England provided the political and moral compass for instituting a dominant heteronormative social environment.

Some Hindu and Muslim subjects of the colonial order attempted to rewrite their literary legacy. One such zealous reformer was Muhammad Husain Azad (1830–1910) who attempted to cleanse Urdu poetry of its homoerotic themes of male same-sex love and desire (Sharma 2009: xxxi). The discomfort that the literary legacy and pre-modern social and sexual customs evoked during the colonial period is evident from the literature of the time. In a short story by Pandey Bechan Sharma (1900–1967), a young Hindu man disapproves of his friend’s new love interest who is a younger man. In showing his disapproval of this relationship, he says: ‘[He] is disgraced on all sides. Everyone says that the shadow of Muslim poets has fallen on this [Hindu]. The idiot ignores his own culture and pure religion and runs about after “idols”’ (Sharma 2009: 61) It is interesting that the disapproving character inverts the classical polemical Muslim slur against Hindus as idolaters or bathparast. Here, the Muslim male becomes the idolater for being beguiled and captivated by male beauty and the Hindu faith is re-imagined as a pure religion that has no place for such depraved, idolatrous behaviour.
More recently, in 2001, members of two NGOs in the northern Indian city of Lucknow that were involved in sexual health initiatives and HIV/AIDS awareness programs for men who have sex with men were arrested after a complaint that the organisations and their members were involved in ‘running a gay club racket’. There was an attempt to link one of the accused, a Muslim, with the Pakistani Intelligence and militant groups operating in Kashmir. More intriguing were the sentiments of the police officers towards the Muslim accused; they said that ‘he was trying to destroy [India] by promoting homosexuality’ and that ‘Hindus don’t have these practices – these are all perversions of the Muslims’ (Kapur 2005: 81).

In this regard, I would like to draw attention to another but related point. One should be careful of romanticising the pre-colonial era. Nonetheless, there is a difference between the homophobia before colonialism and after colonialism besides the proposition that pre-colonial disapproval of same-sex desire and sexual conduct was less pervasive than its modern counterpart. This was best formulated by Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli in their work on love poetry in the early modern Ottoman period. There is a difference between thinking ‘My body, like everyone else’s, is urging me to do things that my society, and perhaps my God, forbids’, and thinking, ‘My mind and body are subject to desires that expert knowledge tells me normal, mentally healthy people do not have’. Pre-modern social and religious thinking was more like the former and modern thinking more like the latter (Andrews and Kalpakli 2006: 15). The current discourse on sexual diversity during the pre-colonial period and the prevalent and official Muslim perspective now demonstrates this difference in outlook in that the contemporary religious approach seems to depart from the pre-modern position and adopt the sensibilities of present notions of sexual identity, stable sexuality and sexual pathology. The colonial legacy has certainly influenced the Muslim religious position but that is for another discussion.

4 Bharosa Trust and Naz Foundation International.
5 It is also imperative to be aware that same-sex desire in pre-colonial Muslim societies was not without its difficulties and hierarchies (such as sex between men and boys, the active sexual participant and the passive one, etc).
6 This entails a more complicated discussion on sexuality in contemporary Muslim religious discourse; however, a single example will suffice to demonstrate what is meant here. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent contemporary jurist, wrote the following on homosexuality in his book of positive law, *The lawful and prohibited in Islam*. 
It is also important to be aware of the orientalist and colonial discourse that was constructed around apparent eastern sexual laxity. Joseph Boone in his essay ‘Vacation cruises; or, the homoerotics of orientalism’ documented the sexual politics that govern and obfuscate masculine European travels to the Near and Middle East. Drawing on travelogues and western male narratives, Boone said:

in those narratives where the occidental traveller, by virtue of his homosexuality, is already the other, we have seen how the presumed equivalence of Eastern homosexuality and occidental personal liberation may disguise the spectre of colonial privilege and exploitation encoded in the hierarchy of white man/brown boy. (2001: 73)

This form of romantic orientalism was quite pervasive and is also evident in the works and attitude of Foucault. Foucault saw a link between ancient Greek homosexuality and male same-sex sexual conduct in North Africa and the Muslim world. In this sense he equated pre-modern Hellenism with modern Muslim societies. His travels to Tunisia, where he indulged in the services of young Arab men and sexual partners in both the French tourist colonies and the Arab community, informed his opinion of Muslim society as a tolerant haven of homosexuality and the expression of same-sex desire. Foucault did not seem to recognise the insidiousness of the sexual tourism culture which had long been a hallmark of colonial domination and European travel in the Muslim world. In fact, in response to gender segregation and discrimination at a political march populated by people of Middle East descent, Foucault justified such actions in light of a positive homosociality and homoeroticism

We must be aware that in regulating the sexual drive Islam has not only prohibited illicit sexual relations and all ways which lead to them, but also the sexual deviation known as homosexuality. This perverted act is a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man’s sexuality, and a crime against the rights of females. The spread of this depraved practice in a society disrupts its natural life pattern and makes those who practice it slaves to their lusts, depriving them of good decent taste, decent morals, and a decent manner of living. (al-Qaradawi nd: 169)

The views expressed by Qaradawi are closer to modern views espoused by Christian conservatives and anti-gay proponents than the classical Islamic position.
or the ‘subtle mixture of friendship and sensuality [and] sexuality’. It is obvious that Foucault constructed an orientalist vision of a sexually permissive orient from a Eurocentric vantage point. This construction cracked subsequent to the Iranian revolution when the Islamic government criminalised homosexuality and imprisoned and executed many who did not fit within its strict heterosexual sexual code (Afary and Anderson 2005: 138–144).

**Fitting in or speaking out: postcolonialism, empire, homophobia and liberation**

As such, while Islam may perhaps be a part of the apparatus of perpetuating homophobia, homophobia does not transpire in isolation. A politicised homophobia usually infuses emotion, sexuality and political violence (Boellstroff 2009: 127). Homophobia is a socially produced form of discrimination located within relations of inequality and therefore is intimately intertwined with other forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism and political and cultural western hegemony. The benevolence towards sexual minorities in the West along the lines of liberal discourses on multiculturalism and diversity is closely aligned to issues of controlled normalisation of relationships (same-sex marriages) and a malignant politics of ‘recognition and incorporation’, which is dependent on ‘ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity’ (Puar 2007: xii). The rise of a gay right wing and what can be termed a gay-Islamophobia within Europe which considers the oriental Arab and Muslim as an outsider, with a ‘queer’ orientation for the perverse, displays the shifting discourse on what is considered queer. In this sense, to be Muslim or Arab is ‘to be become Oriental’ which, according to prominent queer theorist Sarah Ahmed, ‘is both to be given an orientation (by the Occident) and to be shaped by the orientation of that gift’ (Ahmed 2006: 114). In the case of a queer Muslim the queerness of the orientation is considered all the more perverse. In fact, the badge or identity of Islam, of being Muslim, acts as a block to ‘motility’ or the ability to ‘extend the body’s reach’ (2006: 142) in an environment that has a vested interest in maintaining ‘straight lines’ which includes adopting the norms of the West. Ahmed suggested that
the normalization of heterosexuality as an orientation toward ‘the other sex’ can be redescribed in terms of the requirement to follow a straight line, whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, non-violent, direct and honest. The naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the other sex, and that ‘this line of desire’ is ‘in line’ with one’s sex. (2006: 70–71)

In this way heterosexual happiness depends on the persecution of the other; its happiness depends on the social wrong of exclusion (Ahmed 2010: 96). In recent times this straight line has been expanded to include very specific forms of sexuality that measure up or are structured in a similar way to monogamous heterosexual relationships. The premise for this inclusion is the confident but somewhat misguided assurance that contentment, pleasure and liberation can only be found in particular forms. John Stuart Mill and other utilitarian thinkers advanced the ethical notion that the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’ is the most moral axiom to decipher which acts are ethical and righteous. Utilitarian thinkers utilised this principle in support of the colonial and imperial missions in Africa and Asia. Mill argued that the costs of empire outweigh the benefits for the coloniser (Ahmed 2010: 123–124; Jones 2005: 182). Happiness, in Mill’s view, is a barometer for civility. In his work *History of British India* Mill suggested that greater happiness would be guaranteed by colonial governance in India because the pace of civilisation would be quickened by the importation of British norms and customs both in the sense of technology and morality. In respect of morality, this included reforming the gender dynamics and sexual structures of India. In short, Mill simply wanted to bring a greater degree of happiness to the unfortunate ‘natives’. Similarly, modern heteronormative power structures are concerned with the happiness of the unfortunate queers, of those who do not ‘fit’ into the civilising modes of creating and maintaining kinship relations. The good life according to this perspective necessitates that heterosexual love becomes the possibility and also the guarantee of happiness (Ahmed 2010: 90). To this extent, concessions have been made to include sexual minorities in the arena of heterosexual happiness. If a same-sex relationship looks similar to a heterosexual one (in that it is stable, monogamous, suburban and integrates with the current consumer-orientated economy), in short a gentrification of a vulgar sexual disposition, then it has the potential to
be co-equal with, or something close to, normative heterosexual relationships. I cautiously accept that this is an important form of recognition for a persecuted minority but it certainly raises many questions.

I will briefly sketch out some of these concerns. First, this form of inclusion functions at times in tandem with the nefarious workings of empire. On 28 October 2009 President Barack Obama signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act, which expanded the hate-crime law to include crimes based on sexual orientation, gender and gender identity. This was rightfully hailed as an important step to provide safety measures for a minority that usually does not have the law on its side. However, there was very little criticism from LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) quarters on another aspect of the Act that provided for a $680 billion dollar budget for the US military, the highest ever, as it was increasing its military presence in Afghanistan and maintaining a morally dubious military and political position in Iraq (Reddy 2011: 1–2). It is important to examine further the connection that permits a state to extend protection to a marginalised minority of citizens within its borders and yet at the same time facilitate violent military actions against people and maintain problematic geographical and political occupations outside its borders.

Also, the recent slogan of gay tolerance in Israel as evidence of Israel’s civility in comparison to the surrounding Arab barbarity and the marketing of Tel Aviv as a gay tourist destination masks the brutal occupation that Israel continues to maintain over Palestinians (see Schulman 2012). Secondly, does this sort of recognition by integration impose a heteronormative structure on sexual minorities in the same way that empire and colonial power impose a social and political structure upon its subjects? So in order to sit at the dinner table of the civilised, one must dress appropriately, one must sit in the right way, eat in the correct fashion, utilise the proper cutlery, indulge in suitable conversation, and imbibe the good manners of the hosts. The question that arises is whether there is an alternative; an alternative that both follows ‘straight lines’ but also departs from them significantly. For some, including many Muslims, following ‘straight lines’ provides ‘access to heterosexual networks in order to survive, which might mean appearing to live a certain kind of life … [which] is necessary’
(Ahmed 2006: 176–177). Nonetheless, queer bodies seem to inhabit their societies and families in a peculiar manner even if it is in a way that appears to be limiting or restrictive. The question of how those who have same-sex desires or partake in same-sex sexual conduct define their kinship ties and relationships is crucial and it is unlikely that the heteronormative option is the only one available.

**Conclusion**

So, in true academic style, I would like conclude with some questions for which I do not have answers. How can the liberation of homosexual Muslims contribute constructively to the critique of empire and its presence in Muslim societies? Can the struggle for recognition be sustained without approximating the very forms of heterosexuality that are the cause of prejudice and discrimination? What alternative kinships are possible, which are not organised by the desire for reproduction, or the desire to be like other families, or by the promise of happiness as ‘being alike’ (see Ahmed 2010: 114)? I think in this regard pre-modern Muslim societies may have something valuable to teach us. It would seem that any liberatory effort in this regard cannot be based on an unbridled celebration of diversity without taking into account the historical legacy of sexuality in Islam and Muslim societies and it also cannot strictly be a continuity with the past or pre-colonial Muslim condition, since neither of these approaches challenges religious and political centres and orthodoxies.

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