

"I Never Stopped Being a Muslim": Navigating Faith and Same-Sex Practices in the

Face of Mainstream Islam, Westernization and Norms of the Abnormal

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

Approved April 2021 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2021

ABSTRACT

In theory, all that are involved in same-sex practices in Islam based on the common and mainstream interpretation of the story of the people of Lut are treated the same. In reality, however, and in the Arab world today, the penetrated and penetrator are not equally abnormal and deviant. Although Western activism involved in gay rights in the Middle East and local communities in several countries who call themselves *Mujtamaa Al Meem*, the community of the letter Meem, which is a localization of the term LGBTQA+ community, are advocating for gay rights for all Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim “gay men” whatever role they play in those practices. The local culture of those societies does not do the same, nor do they believe in their normality. By looking at different interpretations of religious scripture, role of Westernization in local “gayness” and “homosexuality”, and how a penetrator/society-forced womanhood status, this thesis will discuss their effect on how a Muslim man, who takes on a penetrated role in same-sex activities navigate faith and sexual practices, and how religiosity, my existence as a Muslim, and my gender identity and/or expression are not measured by how sinless/sinful I am or by which sin I commit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all three members of my committee. Dr. Beth Swadener for being involved in this project since the first time we discussed our research questions in her research methods and always being there whenever I needed help even before she became my committee chair. Dr. Chad Haines for being the first that had an open door for me to come in and talk to him about what eventually became a thesis that discusses Muslims and same-sex practices, and for all of our discussions and conversations that led to writing several chapters in this thesis. And last but certainly not least, Dr. Charles Lee for his constant support throughout this whole journey in graduate school, during the research and writing of my thesis and other times.

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FOREWORD

Admission of Guilt, or lack thereof

When I got admitted to the Justice Studies MS program, I was determined to focus on Muslims and to go out and talk to people about issues relating to religiosity. That was very frustrating, and resulted in nothing. Not nothing, but it reoriented and refocused my research question and approach to addressing it. When I officially started my research and thesis project, after weighing many options and attempting to recruit participants for an interview-based study, I made the decision to not interview others and instead write an exploratory analytical thesis based on personal reflections. I made this decision for several reasons.

One of those reasons is frustration, as mentioned above. But a more significant issue relating to interviews was in the back of my mind. The fear of misrepresentation. The fear of limited representation. The fear of judgment. It was one too many fears for me to handle, unfortunately. This is a project on Muslims and religiosity, which later became a question of how to navigate religion and sexuality. It was so sensitive and private to begin with for me to misrepresent it. It was also the lack of accurate, or targeted representation that I disliked about interviewing people. I wanted Saudis, I wanted people from countries similar to Saudi, like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the rest of GCC countries, but it was almost impossible because of the sensitivity of the project and what the project represents. People from those countries are not too eager to talk about sex and sexuality, especially if it includes same-sex practices. So, I would have to interview

people who I do not share the exact experience with and come from different cultures and societies.

The other reason is more personal. I could not bring myself to talk about religiosity, same-sex practices and behaviors in Saudi when I haven't really experienced those in Saudi. I couldn't bring myself to discuss other people's experiences with sex and sexuality in Saudi when I had the luxury of not struggling like a lot of people did for not "passing" as "straights" or being not too bothered by the word "fag" or not being affected by hearing it. There is so much guilt, which may or may not be necessary, for me to write about others. Even though the lines of male-female, masculinity-femininity were, and still are blurred for me, I had the privilege to not be physically affected by it, in any kind of way that caused any emotional or mental harm. This is not to say that I haven't had my share of harassment, and as I mentioned above, verbal, as well as physical, but it had less negative impact on me than it did on others who, although I hope not, are still suffering.

I cannot change a lot, or maybe anything for anyone who is like me, had or having an experience similar to mine, but at least I can do them a favor and not speak of everyone's experience, or the experiences of the majority, or even the minority. I can do them a favor in not sugar-coating it or making it worse. I can do them a favor and only talk about my experience. I can talk about Yousef. I can hide and share as much as I want because it is about me, and no one else. Religious cultures and societies bury us in so much guilt. This is one of those attempts to not be guilty for doing something. Afraid, probably, ashamed perhaps, just not guilty.

The reason I needed to share this admission of guilt is because when I introduce myself in the next section I need it to be understood as a story of one person, a person of

privileges, socially, religiously, educationally, among other things. It might not be shared by many others,

and that shouldn't dismiss my experience or ignore other people's experiences when it comes to the intersectionality of religion, gender and sexual practices and how one understands culture and how much your participation in society, your place and position influence those experiences.

But first, let me introduce myself..

I turn 26 in May of 2021 and I still struggle with the question. Who am I? And lately, what am I? So one can easily assume that it wasn't easy for 20 years old or 15 years old Yousef. The only difference is that 15 years old Yousef wasn't too concerned with defining or, to be more academic, labeling himself.

It's a bit ironic that my younger self was not too bothered or concerned with what some might call "understanding" himself, compared to myself today, who is writing an exploratory analytical thesis to attempt to understand who or what he is in a world of various personal narratives and identity politics. But, here we are, about to embark on a journey critical of mainstream religiosity, Westernized identities, and traditional/cultural existence.

I am a Saudi Sunni Muslim man who discovered sex, and perhaps sexuality at a young age, but was not personally affected by it until recently. I come from a middle class background, or maybe upper middle class, the more I think about it, that is religious in the sense it practiced religion in its daily life practices. We pray, we fast, we don't drink alcohol.etc. Some Muslims, and non-Muslims, call this a "normal" Muslim family, but I prefer to use the term "conservative" because we are practicing it to the best of our ability and knowledge of what being Muslims is, and what Islam is. Conservatives, not fanatics. Conservatives, not from a Muslim background, or culturally Muslims. Muslims, conservatively. It becomes harder and harder to explain to someone what I mean when I say I am a conservative Muslim because of what the word "conservative" represents nowadays, especially in the West, which is a vital point that we will revisit later.

As I mentioned earlier, I was introduced to sex at an early age. I was in elementary school, 9 or 10 years maybe. The only reason I am skeptical about saying I was introduced to sexuality as well is because when I realized what sex is, what sexual intercourse is, it was sex, just sex. There was no gender, in terms of sexuality, and there was no straight sex or gay sex. There was sex and sex only. Of course, the way I would look at it today, I was introduced to sex in a couple of different ways. In both ways, it was visual, but experienced, visually, differently.

The first way I experienced sex was just like everyone else, porn. This was back in 2005-2006 when it wasn't easily accessible, and Bluetooth was a curious kid's best friend. I still remember some of those early videos I saw when I was a kid. Homemade videos, professional pornography, men, women, transwomen, and again, in what I would describe it today, gay and straight. They did not necessarily do anything, they did not incite anything in me, but they were step one into sex. They laid the foundation for me to realize that sex happens differently and is practiced in many, many ways.

The second way I experienced sex was what I believe had the real effect on me. I experienced it by watching others have sex. People I knew. People I never thought of as people who would have sex like those in porn. But they did. And they were all males. This was the moment I realized, not just by being told or watching a video, that males can and do have sex with other males. We don't reach any religious conclusions just yet. This, again, we will revisit later. I never participated in this myself and the reason is simple and complicated at the same time, it was fear. Again, no conclusions are drawn

here as well until later on, both personally and in this thesis. I did not have sex until I was 20 or 21, I think.

I introduced sexuality to myself, somehow, when I used the term “bisexual” in high school. I still do not understand the reason behind using it to describe myself. I am not even sure if I said it jokingly or desperately. But it is my earliest memory of sexuality and its labels. And in Saudi Arabia of all places, where the lines between sexuality and sexual practices are blurred, which, in this cultural-criticism-motivated exploratory project, I realize it’s not a bad thing, or not all bad.

A couple of years pass by, I graduate from high school in the summer of 2013 and move to Tempe, AZ for college that fall. That’s when I was hit with sex and sexuality very hard, and started a misguided journey of self-discovery. I claim to have become more religious in the United States but I have no way of proving that. I claim to have better understood sex and sexuality, but, again, I have no way of proving that. One claim that I can stick by is that I became more aware of others’ perceptions, understanding and views of who or what I am, and that is how this, as I described it earlier, cultural-criticism-motivated exploratory thesis takes shape.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The debate has always been on whether or not same-sex practices, and/or homosexuality is accepted in Islam, and the majority would agree that same-sex practices are forbidden. They are forbidden because of the story of the people of Lut in the Quran. The verses used in the argument make it seem as a direct and simple ruling on an issue, but is it direct and simple? Other interpretations argue that it is not.

But however scholars interpret the verses and make sense of them, as well as decide what those engaging in them can and cannot do, should and should not do, and must and must not feel. Although several studies conducted in Western countries involved Muslims who identify as gay, Arab and Muslim immigrants, and so on, very little work has been done on those living in the Arab world, especially people like myself who are from Saudi Arabia, and although studying abroad, live in Saudi Arabia and engage in same-sex activities.

Saudi Sunni Muslim like myself have others to speak for them, without our permission or even an invitation to participate in the discussion. And when I say like myself, I mean those who take on the penetrated role in same-sex activities. We have other Muslims and Saudis telling us how to read the Quran and how to engage in Islamic thought and tradition, we have Western scholars and “gay rights” activists telling us how oppressed we are and how we need help to live “our truth” proudly, and we have forced gender-specific behavior, appearance and roles in those same-sex activities by other men

who take on the penetrator role. All of this led me to ask, how do I navigate faith and sexual practices with and without the influence of all of those forces?

Before I can start to unpacking the journey that is navigating faith and same-sex practices, however, a couple of things must be kept in mind. There is no universal truth of Islam. There isn't an Islam that all Muslims can agree on. These are my interpretations. These are my beliefs. And although I do try to break and move away from what was taught to me and how I experienced Islam, and still do, I still am skeptical, sometimes, of what is new to me, of what might not make sense with my previous experiences and notions of what Islam is. In the back of my mind, there will always be that voice that tells me that this might be "too much", or this is not what I am used to, or this is not how we, in Saudi, do or think about a certain thing. I am sure that I normalize Islam sometimes based on my experience and understanding, but in no way do I claim that to be the truth about and/or of Islam.

I also have to make sure to readdress the privilege that I had, and still entertain. I have the privilege of being a male, a man in Saudi Arabia. Although I discuss same-sex practices and how that might have its legal as well as social consequences, but I still am in a better position, compared to others engaging in same-sex practices, such as females who are engaging in same-sex practices. There are many freedoms that I entertain, and privileges, that allow me to do what females who desire other females are unable to do. The simplest to recognize is my ability to go out, stay out for hours and hours, and be able to meet whomever I want, without raising any suspicion. And that privilege is one of the reason this thesis is exclusive to male same-sex practices, and not ignoring, but

unpacking the experience of female same-sex practices, and for their lack of visibility in a place like Saudi Arabia.

Organization of Thesis

To attempt and address that question, chapters two and three serve as a discussion and findings section, similar to a literature review. In the second chapter, I look at how scripture, the Quran as well as hadith is treated and interpreted by scholars on both sides, those advocating for acceptance and tolerance of same-sex activities, and those maintaining the mainstream interpretation and ruling on those activities. And I also consider what scholars have argued for and against the public policing of sin, and how carrying out the duty commanding right and forbidding wrong is exercised. Chapter three continues looking at scholars' argument of sexual practices, while also considering how the cultural and social aspects of Arabs, and Saudi especially, are influencing those religious interpretations, and how normalization efforts, mostly by Westerners are effecting Arabs and Muslims reactions to same-sex practices.

Chapters four through seven, although interrogating and discussing scholarly work, they are mostly personal reflections, that use my cultural, sexual and religious experience in navigating faith and sexual practices. Chapter four focuses on the issue of religion and religiosity and how they are experienced differently by each and every Muslim, and of course understood differently. Chapter five revisits scripture, focusing on my own interpretation, how I receive hadith and whether or not validity of individual experiences of Muslims can or are necessarily visible in scripture. Chapter six looks at all

the different terms that are used, locally and internationally, to describe my practices and how I use them, and choosing to redefine and accept, or refuse, to use them personally or have them used to describe you, or label you. I also address current confusion in Saudi Arabia, even among those participating in same-sex activities, of sexual practices and gender identity based on what is culturally viewed as masculine or feminine.

Chapter seven discusses more applicable ways of normalization. This way or type of normalization is less social and more legal. Where the West is trying to normalize in the sense that “gays” and “homosexuals” are normal people, what I argue for is a decriminalization of private sexual practices and putting an end to the social and legal witch hunt of adults consensually engaging in same-sex activities.

Research Question

This project used personal reflections, engagement with Muslim teachings and other analyses to address the following question:

How do Muslim men navigate faith and same-sex practices through interrogating 1) mainstream interpretations of the Quran, hadith and policing sin; 2) forced Western gay identity; 3) and the norms of abnormal practices of gender and “womanhood” status of the penetrated.

Between Arabic and English, sexuality, sexual practices, gender and identity are lost in translation. To better understand the difference between my experience and a white gay guy from the US or the UK for instance, an analysis of the used terminology both in English and Arabic, how they are used in Western societies and Muslim/Arab societies, and that's why the research question uses "same-sex practices" and not "sexuality" and/or "homosexuality" to explore the sexual practices of a Muslim Arab man.

Terminological Observations

Today, one can think of at least three or four words to describe same-sex sexual activities, either the act itself or those engaging in same-sex activities. Those words, or terms, however, are foreign to Islam and the Arabic language, and until two centuries ago, they were relatively new to the West.

Homosexual, heterosexual, gay, straight, queer and so on, are all terms that are recently defined and translated to Arabic, for religious and legal purposes. And they are not all easily defined, as they are West-specific, English-specific and not needed in the Arabic language or for Arabs and Muslims. If you ask someone what heterosexual and straight mean, chances are they will describe a relationship and won't be able to find a word for it in Arabic. You will hear something along the lines of "Oh a man and a woman" but the word itself, heterosexual or straight, does not exist and potential translations of it can be problematic.

The same thing can happen with homosexual and gay. Although the work of Orientalists in 18th and 19th century and how "sexual deviance" was used to describe immoral sexual practices (Massad, 2007), influenced a misguided translation of the terms

homosexual and gay. If you ask someone to translate the terms homosexual and gay to Arabic, chances are the answer will be *Shath*. The word Shat, derived from Shothoth Jinsi, which translates to sexual deviance to a Muslim or an Arabic speaker may have the same effect as the word homosexual and gay, but it is not what the terms themselves mean, or used, today in the West, for and by a gay person.

Another term that has been reclaimed by queer theorists and members of the LGBTQIA+ community in the West is *queer*. Queer can be defined in couple of different ways, depending on how you used it. Historically, “it was often used to describe something that seemed strange, or not quite right” (Daring, 2012, p. 10), which is very similar to how the word would translate to Arabic. This definition of it, could be applied to many different things, sexually or otherwise, but then it became sex-oriented. It became a “slur against people who were perceived to be lesbian and/or gay--particularly effeminate men” and the more contemporary, and positive way, as a “shorthand for various identities contained in the LGBT” community.

Queer in Arabic is commonly translated to something, or someone that is abnormal and/or ill. Something and/or something, going back to the original meaning of the term, not quite right. It used today, just like gay and lesbian, in a positive way by individuals who self-identify as queer, gay, and lesbian.

Another way that some translate “gay” or “homosexual” intellectually, academically, and in the arts, like movies and songs is by using the word *Munharif*, a pervert, which could mean a couple more things that has nothing to do with gayness and homosexuality. The subtitles of the 2011 movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*

translated the word “gay” to *munharif*, pervert (Clemons, 2012). This translation is not used outside of academia and literature translations.

For Muslims and Arabic speakers, there are very few terms that, today, can relate to sexuality and sexual minorities. Mukhanatheen, or effeminate, the plural of Mukhannat, is one of them (Rowson, 1991). The term, in this context, in its original meaning, did not have any same-sex activities implications. It was used to describe men who did not desire women sexually, without implying they engaged in same-sex activities, and/or good looking young men. In the last two or three centuries, and maybe before that, the term was used differently.

Mukhannath, or how it has been used in the last two centuries, Khaneeth, is one of the very few terms and words used to describe someone engaging in same-sex activities. The Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan was among the first non-Arabs and non-Muslims to notice, or address this phenomenon (Murray, 1997). During her time in Oman in 1974, which at the time was, and still is, influenced by Bloush and other non-Arab ethnic groups, she noticed men who women behaved freely around and did not cover their faces in those men’s presence. She later became aware of the role those men played in the Sohari society of Oman at the time. They were, as she described them, domestic servants and male prostitutes. Homosexuals, to her.

Today, the word Khaneeth, or Mukhannath, translates to fag/faggot, and is used to describe the penetrated individual in the sexual activity. And just like the West developed more terms to describe individuals engaging in same-sex practices, nowadays, Arabic

speakers have their own terms to describe individuals engaging in same-sex practices and activities.

In the West, the words top and bottom are usually used to describe the position or the role of the individuals engaging in those activities. A top is the penetrator, and a bottom is the penetrated. Between those two, more terms appeared. Versatile is one of them. A versatile is someone who tops and bottoms during sex. There is of course vers top, which is a versatile who tops more than he bottoms, and vice versa.

In the Arab world *Salib*, *Mojab* and *Mubadil* are the closest translation, in meaning, not literally, to top, bottom and versatile. A Salib, which literally means negative, is a bottom, the penetrated. A Mujab, literally translates to positive, is a top, the penetrator. A Mubadil, which could be loosely translated as exchanger, is a versatile, someone who penetrates and does not mind being penetrated. It is not clear exactly when or how those terms became used to describe those individuals. It could be estimated however that people, especially those engage in same-sex activities to identify themselves, started using them, approximately, in the last 10-12 years in the Arab world.

Identity-based terminology, like gay and lesbian are exclusively Western. Homosexual and gay men are those whose “identity is largely and indelibly shaped by their attraction to other males” (Kugle 2010, p. 9). To Muslims, those terms are not identity-based. They describe a behavior, something you do. Recently, there have been movements in several countries in the Arab world, like Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia where those terms are claimed to describe the person’s identity. He is not only engaging in same-sex activities, he is gay. Another term is becoming more visible when describing

contemporary “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTQ)” Muslims who self-identify as such members of the LGBTQIA+ community, which is “queer Muslims” (Hamzic, 2011). Many Muslims, and scholars as well, tend to refer to those Muslims as queer because the term’s non-normative nature and inclusivity.

As mentioned before, the confusion of sexual desires and gender identity is very problematic and potentially dangerous, physically, emotionally and mentally. As this confusion persists, some men tend to use the term “gay” not as an identity-defining term, but to make sure what they are doing is not to be confused with “gender dysphoria.” When A Muslim, or someone in the Middle East says “I’m gay”, it does not necessarily mean what “I’m gay” means in the United States. When someone uses “I’m gay”, there is a good possibility they mean they are not transsexuals (Bayoumi & Najmabadi, 2020). “I’m gay” here becomes a way to clearly distinguish between what he is doing and gender dysphoria, and to say he is not a transwoman.

The case of same-sex practices in the Arab and/or Muslim world complexity can be seen in the complexity of a task that seems simple like terminology. The West was successful in labeling and calling things by certain names, and that was its only success. It was not very successful in addressing the issues of those people so it was quickly defined and labeled. Muslims inherited this issue, and they inherited the need to label things, practices, and people as well, but were not successful because they wanted to translate and not fully understand and comprehend what they were translating or why they were translating.

While the West might see Muslims and Arabs as hypocritical because of how easily some, if not most, bounce between same-sex and different-sex activities and “refuse Western identification of gayness” (Massad, 2002), Muslims were doing a very good job in leaving those practices and behaviors undefined and categorized, or even publicly explored. The need to define, the need to use terminology in this context allowed for control of the discourse on sex and sexual practices that later became an issue of sexuality, and bringing something that is private to the public to condemn its immorality and abnormality.

Methodology

In this exploratory analytical thesis, I conducted a review of the literature, mostly Quran and hadith, that mentioned same-sex practices, as well as scholarly work that discusses different interpretations and challenges mainstream interpretations of the story of the people of Lot and what is claimed to be said by the Prophet about those who do what the people of Lot did, and engage various cultural and religious aspects regarding gender and same-sex practices based on personal reflections.

In chapters two and three I do a comprehensive literature review that includes both the discussion and findings on Quranic interpretations, hadith, policing sin, sexual practices, gender, and the current Western-influenced theoretical aspirations for normalization. In the remaining chapters I use myself as my data to attempt to address the research question of this thesis, which is how do Muslim men navigate faith and sexual practices. I do so by interrogating several norms of my culture and society.

Although some observations are included, my experience, my own practices and understanding of religion and religiosity are the main things motivating the discussion in addressing the question. Since I am the data used in this research, this is not only one-sided in the sense it tells one story, but it also discusses sexual practices of someone who is penetrated, not a penetrator, which changes the ways I could think of terms and gender, and how society views my role in those practices.

CHAPTER TWO

Scripture

Lut in the Quran: What Did His People Do?

The Story

It all begins with the prophet Lut and what his people did. Every Muslim knows the story of Lut and his people, and the majority of Muslims have drawn the same conclusion and the lesson to be learned from that story. If you ask any Muslim you see walking by about what they know about Lut and what his people did, chances are the answer will be along the lines of same-sex practices. And if you ask them what they learned from that story, the answer would probably be that same-sex practices are wrong. Clear and simple. However, the story itself and what one might learn from it is not as simple, nor as clear as most Muslims might think.

An angel visited Abraham and told him about the fate of Lut and his people. He told them Lut was in that village, and the angel told Abraham “we know.” Soon after that, two angels visited Lut and his people as humans. They appeared as two handsome, youngmen. Lut knew who they were, his people did not, and like all the other prophets, his people did not believe in his Prophethood. What we know about what happened in the events that followed the two angels visiting Lut are mentioned in the Quran but not in great detail.

What most Muslims agree on is that the people of Lut were open about their same-sex practices. The Quran only mentions men having those practices. There are no

elaborations on those practices. What we know is that the men in Lut's village desired Lut's guests, the two handsome young men who are angels. Those same-sex practices are what is known and believed to have caused the punishment of the people of Lut. It is one of the things agreed on in so many branches and religious groups. Allah punished the people of Lut for committing same-sex practices, for committing what became known as sodomy, or as it became known to some Muslims "liwat" meaning the doing of the people of Lut.

Lut Compared to Saleh: Different Punishments, Same Wrath

The story might make sense when first introduced to you at a young age, or in a conservative society. It makes sense until it does not. And of course, it does not make sense to a small percentage of Muslims. We can start by looking at the idea of Allah punishing a group of people that he sent a prophet to, and they did not believe in the prophet. We can also compare Lut to other prophets who had their Prophethood rejected and denied by their people. The prophet Saleh and the people of Thamud are a great example and comparison when it comes to Allah's punishment.

Saleh was sent to the people of Thamud, and of course, like many tribes, they did not believe in his message. They reject it, they make fun of it, and so on. What Thamud did was an attempt to either really test Saleh and his abilities and this God that he is introducing to them, or simply just making fun of him. They asked for a miracle. A miracle was granted. Allah gave them a camel, a she-camel. The only thing they were asked not to do was to let the animal in peace, to not touch her or harm her. Of course, they did not respect those orders. They hamstrung the she-camel. Saleh then tells his

people that they will be punished, and within days, an earthquake hits the land, and all but those who believed Saleh survived.

Now we can think of what Thamud did, and their punishment. While all Muslims agree that the reason they were punished was for going against Allah and Saleh and harming the she-camel, no one could say that is exactly why they were punished. The she-camel was a sign of Saleh Prophethood. They were not punished for simply harming an animal, although a sinful act, but not worthy of Allah's wrath, such as the fate of Thamud and the people of Lut. They were punished because they denied Saleh's Prophethood, and ignored what Allah and he asked of them as a sign of respect to him and Allah, to not harm the she-camel, the miracle.

The same logic should have been applied to the so-called crime committed by the people of Lut. Whether it's a sin or not, is another debate, one no one wants to have. So, once we treat the doing and the punishment of the people of Lut like we treat and analyze the doing and punishment of Thamud, we can start to look at same-sex practices and those who commit them slightly differently. Slightly.

Just as Allah did not destroy a whole village and most of its people, it would not make sense to say He did it for another tribe. Of course, here we get to an issue of assuming what Allah might or might not do. This is not an attempt to understand what Allah might or might do to a group of people, or how he would punish or reward them. This is an attempt to logically analyze a historical event that shaped a theological debate for centuries, a story that affects the lives of so many Muslims today. The two angels that appeared as human beings were a sort of a miracle. Lut's guests can be viewed as his

miracle. The test of his people. They mistreated Lut's guests. They attacked them. One can make the argument that their mistreatment of the guests of the prophet Lut, which were a sign of his Prophethood and legitimacy, are the reason they were punished and shown the wrath of Allah. Their same-sex practices could still be viewed as sinful acts.

One Story, Different Interpretations

It is commonly believed that Lut was sent specifically for the purpose of condemning his people's same-sex practices (Kilgerman, 2007, p. 53). The Quranic verse that is usually referenced for the condemnation of same-sex practices, or the Westernized, identity-oriented term, homosexuality helps with that notion and believe. When one hears or reads Allah saying "Do you approach males among the worlds and leave what your Lord has created for you as mates? But you are a people transgressing" (26:165-66) it is easy to make that assumption. The assumption that same-sex practices are so harshly and explicitly condemned. However, other interpretations of not only the wording of the verses, of how the story is mentioned in the Quran, but the story itself suggests that there is more to the punishment, the wrath and condemnation than what is commonly believed and thought.

Although the men in Sodom and Gomorrah sexually desired other men and committed same-sex practices, it is somewhat clear that those men are married men, or some of them are at least. They had wives. They did not desire other men exclusively. This realization changes how we perceive what some of those men did. Some argue that it isn't simply a matter of same-sex practices, but a matter of infidelity, among the other known crimes they committed, like robbery, and so on (Kugle, 2010, p. 51). Fakhr Al Din

Al Razi had similar views when interpreting the story of Lut. He, while still condemning same-sex practices, believed that the condemnation of the people of Lut in the Quran was for how those same-sex activities were conducted. He believed they were condemned because they were done in groups (Jahangir & Abdullatif, 2016, p. 26). Could Allah have punished them for their lust, rape, sexual assault, infidelity, and hostility, not only against Lut and his angel guests, but everyone, and for what we think was an intimate, consensual sexual intercourse? It's a possibility that not a lot have explored.

Same-Sex Practices and Intimacy in Hadith

Hadith, the secondary major source of guidance for most Muslims, is comprised of collections of traditions that contains the sayings of Prophet Mohammed, his companions, Al Sahaba, or members of his family, Ahl Al Bait, that help us understand in more details what our religion is about, and what the Prophet used to do and say, for us to follow in his footsteps.

What the Quran did not address in great detail, or at all, would be usually elaborated on in Hadith. Not only that, but we get a glimpse of how the Prophet himself used to live, what he preferred, we learn about his likes and dislikes, his personality, his kindness, his love, and so many other things. The only issue with Hadith is its difficulty to prove its authenticity.

There are several traditions from Sunna, his daily practices, and things he said, or something heard him say, where its authenticity is agreed upon, unanimously, there are others that are partially recognized, others that are considered weak, and finally, there are those that are lies. It's a complicated science. This is not an attempt to break down that science or to explain it in greater detail. This an attempt to view, yet again, two sides of the same story.

Just like the interpretations of the story of Prophet Lut in the Quran are different based on how you view the story itself and how you read into it, sayings of Prophet Mohammed are no exception. It is actually to debate the sayings of the Prophet, or what we believe and assume the Prophet said, then it is to debate the Quran. For Hadith, we are relaying, completely, on what companions, and companions of those companions, and

their followers and so on, think they heard the Prophet said, or assumed that is what he meant. The Quran has been the same since day one. It hasn't changed. The verses are the same. Even the later verses that contradict the earlier verses are still included. So, while the story of Lut in the Quran seems to sensitive to be interpreted so freely, even though it shouldn't and we should be able to freely interpret it, Hadith gives us more room and space to revisit what we know about the Prophet himself to see if what is being claimed as his saying is true or not, or at least, do we, personally, think the Prophet would have said something like that.

Not much in Hadith can be used to understand the punishment for committing same-sex practices, or clear condemnation of it, however, there are incidents where it is believed that the Prophet did condemn and asked for punishment for those who do what the people of Lut did. It is believed that Prophet Mohammed said "Doomed by God is who does what Lut's people did [ie homosexuality]" (Kilgerman, 2007, p. 54) and it also believed that the punishment for those who do what the people of Lut do is the death penalty, for both the penetrated and the penetrator (Murray& Roscoe, 1997). There are many versions with slight differences, but they all give us the same idea. They all speak for either only the condemnation of doing what Lut's people did, or mention the punishment, which seems to be the death penalty, and nothing less, for everyone involved.

On the other hand, there is a story that seems to refer to men who do not sexually desire women, and it involves not only the Prophet, but some of his wives. This Hadith, which was reported by Aisha, the prophet's second wife to which a majority of Hadith is

attributed, and Ibn Hanbal and Muslim preserved, is “in the following form: ‘There was a *mukhannath* (effeminate man) who used to be admitted to the presence of the Prophet's wives. He was considered one of those lacking interest in women. One day the Prophet entered when this *mukhannath* was with one of his wives; he was describing a woman, and said 'When she comes forward, it is with four, and when she goes away, it is with eight.' The Prophet said, 'Oho! I think this one knows what goes on here! Do not admit him into your presence.’” (Rowson, 1991).

While this Hadith does not necessarily directly help anyone in building a case for same-sex practices and intimacy in Islam, it does help, however, with building a case against the earlier recollections where it is believed the Prophet said to punish those who do what Lut’s people did with the death penalty.

As we mentioned earlier, it is not very clear what the “doing of the people of Lut” is, so if we do believe the Prophet did condemn those who do what Lut’s people did, this Hadith cannot be applied to all same-sex practices. Since the doing of Lut’s people could be sexual lust and assault, rape, theft, mockery of Lut’s Prophethood, and while the Hadith could be authentic, it is impossible to say that everyone who engages in same-sex practices is included in his condemnation.

As for the other Hadith where the Prophet said to punish those who do what Lut’s people did with the death penalty, this seems the less likely to be an authentic Hadith. The Prophet would not ask his companions, or any Muslim to kill another person for any reason other than self-defense. The Prophet asked Muslims not to harm a tree or a fly in a time of war, so one can imagine how merciful the Prophet was. It makes no sense for him

to demand that this one group, and only this group of people, be punished this way. Of all the crimes distinctly condemned in Islam, only killing someone for no reason is punishable by death, so how can something so private and personal be as bad as killing someone? It becomes an issue of the Prophet's ethics and morals, would he, knowing him, ethically and morally, would he seek the death penalty for sexual intercourse, regardless of its nature?

We end this section with the Hadith reported by Umm Al Momineen, Mother of the Faithful, Aisha, and the story of the effeminate man. The Hadith does not explicitly mention sexual practices and desires but from what is understood from it, we can make sense of the man's desires, not his practices though. We can tell the man does not sexually desire women because he is in the presence of other women that he should not be with, and the Prophet's wife of all women. If he did desire women, and he wasn't married to any of the women he was with or was a family member, he wouldn't be allowed to be in their presence. We realize in this Hadith that the Prophet is aware of this. He knows this man has been spending time with women, and he does not mind it because of his lack of sexual desire. The Prophet only objected to the effeminate man socializing with women is when the man described the body of another woman, which he clearly saw and was in her presence as well for him to be able to describe her body so we now know that it is not just the Prophet who does not mind this man socializing with women and his family members but other men as well. This incident does not necessarily mean he sexually desired the women, but simply because he noticed her body and its curves.

This story shows a level of tolerance that is undeniably very characteristic of the Prophet. This was a man, who may or may not desire other men, known as an effeminate, with the Prophet acknowledging it and there are no signs of condemnation or punishment, living among the Prophet and everyone else in Medina. This is where we revisit the previous recollections and try to see if it would make sense for someone like the Prophet to seek this punishment, a punishment so harsh that is only used when another soul has been punished by it for no reason by another soul, to seek death.

In this section, and the previous one, I used scripture and tradition to explore sexual practices in Islam, how they are understood and how different stories, different interpretation influence today's practices, and even laws. And since laws in several Muslim-majority countries are influenced by those interpretations and stories, the next section is used as a way to analyze the concept of policing sin in those countries and societies, and the difference between policing sin is a law of the country, and policing sin in Islam as part of the religion.

Policing Sin

Tolerance and disapproval aside, very few argue that same-sex practices are not considered a sinful act. The majority of Muslims agree that same-sex activities are considered a sin. And like a good number of other sins, a punishment accompanies it. Same-sex practices, however, are not like theft, murder, and some of the other sins that have very clear punishments.

Although, and as discussed previously, some believe in the authenticity of the Hadith where the Prophet is believed to have said that all of those who do what the people of Lut did must be killed, there is no agreed upon punishment for same-sex activities. What the people of Lut did and same-sex activities are not necessarily the same, which creates an issue for those claiming the Prophet ordered the killing of those who do the same, like ISIS throwing “homosexuals” from the top of a building. Today we in Saudi Arabia, and most of the Arab world, may see imprisonment as punishment. All of this makes us question the validity of the religious punishment for a sexual activity of the sort.

Sexual activities, for the most part, and especially same-sex activities, are committed in privacy, making it impossible for anyone to prove the involvement of two men, or more, in those activities. People know from other rulings regarding other sexual activities that eyewitnesses are necessary to prove that a “sin” has been committed. Premarital sex in Islam is forbidden, and is always spoken of in terms of male/female sexual intercourse. If someone claims others have engaged in premarital sexual activities, eyewitnesses must be present. This requirement, the eyewitnesses requirement, tells us

that those activities are conducted and committed privately and not publicly, and they also raise the question of policing sin. To what extent are Muslims expected to command right and forbid wrong?

The Quran has many verses that can be used either for or against commanding right and forbidding wrong. The first one, obviously, and the most used one is “Let there be a group among you who call others to goodness, encourage what is good, and forbid what is evil—it is they who will be successful” (3:104) There are several translations of the Quran, and people can see that in this verse. The words used here are “encourage” and “evil” instead of “command” and “wrong”, but what is closer to the words *Yaamoroun* and *Munkar*, however are Command and Wrong. This is less about an issue of translation and more an issue of interpretation.

Other verses from the Quran can contradict other verses, which is not unusual, because people can understand the meaning behind those verses using the context they were used in and the historical event and/or incident they were revealed during. “I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship” (109:2-3), “So continue to remind all, O Prophet, for your duty is only to remind, you are not there to compel them to believe” (88:21-22), and ““And say, O Prophet, This is the truth from your Lord. Whoever wills let them believe, and whoever wills let them disbelieve. Surely We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose walls will completely surround them. When they cry for aid, they will be aided with water like molten metal, which will burn their faces. What a horrible drink and what a terrible place to rest” (18:29) are verses that,

although do not address committing a sin as a Muslim, that speak to the greatest sin of all, not believing in Allah or worshipping someone with Him.

The first and second verses reveal how the Prophet was not sent to command anything, he was sent to share Allah's message with the people of Quraish, his tribe, and the people of Mecca, without forcing them to believe in him. He was sent to simply remind them, he was sent with his faith, to them, with their faith, to try and convince them to believe in his Prophethood and message from Allah. Although they do not address committing sins, they help us understand the role of the Prophet, not just anyone, but the Prophet himself, as a messenger from Allah, and as his followers and his Ummah, our role when it comes to commanding right and forbidding wrong.

The last verse helps us to understand the concept of punishment in Islam. All sins are to be punished in the Afterlife, hint the usage of the word "Fire", and most sins do not have a punishment on earth. What this means is that punishments are, or most of punishments are something that Allah handles, not humans. If you kill an innocent soul, there is a punishment for that before Judgment day, if you lie, there isn't. This is a clear indicator that sins that don't cause harm to others are not subject to earthly punishments, and that is where people start to see a clear difference between religious punishments and legal punishments in modern, civil societies.

This confusion in how to command right and forbid wrong, how to punish what is wrong, plays a huge role in the prosecution of those engaging in same-sex activities nowadays. Incidents of punishments being administered by the state for those who are proven or suspected to have engaged in same-sex activities are somewhat new to

Muslims and “Muslim societies”, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, a very Puritan-like tradition of punishing sinners before the Afterlife in hopes of a more ethical and moral society.

The influence of the West is somewhat religious in this aspect. Since the political sphere is penetrated by the religious sphere in both the West and Muslim-majority states, the duty of monitoring sin, and criminalizing sins, became the responsibility of the state, not the individual. This comes from the Hadith where the Prophet said that the ruler is responsible for those he rules. Throughout history, however, this responsibility, this duty has been debated, mainly focusing on who should carry this duty and responsibility. Ibn Hanbal argued that the state should not be involved in this duty. He believed it was the individual’s responsibility. Meaning it was for the people to command right and forbid wrong among themselves (Cook, 2001).

The issue of political systems and bodies and the religious sphere is very problematic. Jurists become judges appointed by the state, they become employees of the political system. It limits their freedoms and intellectuality. They may become submissive not to reason but to the ruler, and may produce rulings, or fatwas, required by the state, like what is believed to have happened during the Abbasids dynasty (Abu-Zahra, 2000).

Even though Ibn Hanbal argued that it was the duty of the individual to command right and forbid wrong, he suggested that it would be less likely to happen, for the individual to carry out the duty, unless those wrongdoings, or sins, are committed publicly, which is unlikely to happen.

Islam does not encourage spying on others, Islam does not encourage witch hunts, or an attempt to publicize ones own sins, let alone someone else's, and that is how people can make sense of what is happening nowadays when it comes to legal consequences for engaging in same-sex activities in different countries. They are laws of the state, not the religion. They may be inspired by religion, or what is believed to be religious duty, obligation or responsibility.

Policing sin, as it can be seen, makes a huge difference of how practices take place. If what is happening privately is treated the same way as what is happening publicly, then it longer becomes an issue of commanding right and forbidding wrong, it becomes a way of controlling every aspect of Muslims lives. In the next chapter, I will discuss how most, if not all sexual practices, gender-specific behavior, and gender identities in Islam, when happening or taking place privately are not policed if not intentionally disruptive or ditracting the public.

CHAPTER THREE

Sexuality/Sexual Practices in Islam(*ic societies, today*)

Are sexual preferences a result of a cultural or a social factor that shapes them in different ways or is it only sexual practices that are affected by cultures and societies and shaped by them? If it's only a practice is it also considered a preference? Sex is a weird thing, in that it is complicated just as much as it simple. You have sex, and that is it. It's that simple. However, since science and religion have complicated the practice by looking for reasons and desires, for different reasons, of course. Why would this person have sexual intercourse with this person? Where is this desire coming from? Those reasons and desires took a different shape in the West when they became identity defining tools.

Why would a man sleep with another man? Because they are gay, they are homosexuals. Because they desire other men sexually. Romantically? Possibly. Now you are gay. That's who you are. You are engaging in same-sex practices, you are defined by those practices. Now of course there are a couple of same-sex practices that the participant would not be considered gay, like those guys who are gay for pay. But since who you sleep with, who you sexually desire is such an identity-defining aspect of your existence in the West, and increasingly rising in other regions of the world, it became very hard to think of sexual practices, same-sex or not, is purely sexual practices.

This limited view of sexuality and sexual desires truly is astonishing, and what is more astonishing is who the rest of the world quickly started to adopt to it and subscribe

to the idea of who you are is who you sleep with. The free world is not necessarily free when it comes to sex. This limited view of sexuality imposed by the West created a problem for other regions of the world, such as the Middle East by condemning their sexual practices that were not necessarily heavily labelled and monitored. When the West suddenly changed its mind and wished to be freer, to free itself from the chains of patriarchy and misogyny, to leave behind the control of the heteronormative, it created a new narrative, a narrative that condemns, you guessed it, the Middle East again.

Not so shocking, white “gay” men took on a more “progressive” missionary role, preaching this new narrative, the gay rights narrative, as part of the U.S. colonial and imperialist human rights discourse (Massad, 2007, p. 160). An orientalist view of the Middle East that once considered Middle Easterners to be deviant, is once again criticizing the Middle East and its sexual freedoms, or the lack of sexual freedoms. Those white, Western, rich, and “educated” “gay” men became the defenders of gays everywhere, especially the Middle East and in Muslim majority countries. But are there gays everywhere?

Historically speaking, same-sex practices are well documented in different parts of the Muslim world and throughout history. Different religious, political and scholar figures however have claimed that there are no gay Muslims (Massad, 2007), or self-proclaimed gays (Duran, 1993). Each for different reasons, same-sex practices and homosexuality are what motivate those views. After all, same-sex practices and homosexuality are not necessarily the same, depending on the context, as well as the geography. However, just because they could be traced back hundreds of years ago, that

does not mean same-sex practices are legitimate, religiously speaking. Their existence for so long, even in times when religious duties, obligations, ethics were more understood and the public sphere was governed, figuratively, by Islam, some people engaged in those practices. This can be understood in a couple of different ways. The public and the private spheres as two separate things is one of them. What happens in the privacy of your own home has nothing to do with what happens out in the public. Ali argues that “the explicit condemnation of same-sex sexual activity in medieval Islamic legal thought and by most contemporary Muslim thinkers has been tempered by tacit tolerance for its practice, provided some degree of discretion is observed” (2013, p. 85). This is how for the majority of Islamic legal thought, same-sex practices are left unnamed and unrecognized, because they are almost impossible to be stopped, so denying they exist or simply turning the other way or ignoring them, as long as they are not committed publicly and those engaging in those activities are not too comfortable with their practices, is the only way societies can deal with same-sex practices. One can distinguish between Muslims and “gays” and consider them impossible to overlap, but people cannot do the same once the identity-defining term is taken away, and the discussion becomes limited to the practice or the activity itself, same-sex practices and activities.

Using the Westernized “gay” makes people’s same-sex activity a matter, or an issue, of sexuality, while having a partner of the same sex to engage in sexual activities with is an issue of sexual practices (Ali, 2013, p. 86). The latter is part of the Muslim discourse on sexual ethics; what it is right and what is wrong, what can and cannot be done, what people can and cannot legitimize. Using “gay”, and gayness in general creates

a problem. It discusses the innate orientation of a person, something Islam does not approach or touch. One cannot find in Islamic literature that can be used to legitimize or condemn “gayness” as a matter of sexuality, unlike sexual practices. When the Quran condemns the doing of the people of Lut, Hadith and medieval literature can be used to argue for more tolerance to those not attracted to women and/or engaging in same-sex activities.

There are of course several things to point out. Many, if not most Muslim scholars, *Ulamah*, have taken it upon themselves to be the sole definers of what Islam is, and this of course the discourse on sexual ethics. They gave themselves the right to be the judge of what is considered Islamic and what is not, eliminating all other potential interpretations and definitions that come with others’ lived experiences and traditions. There’s the claim that Ulama are the heirs of the prophets, which gives the ulama the upper hand if people actually believe they were. This struggle between what those definers of the truth, of the “right” Islam, and others who experience Islam differently exists today more than ever. This could explain the lack of dialogue, debate in literature, especially in places like Saudi Arabia, that address sexual practices differently than the way ulama and their students address them. Many reformists, linguistics as well as legalists might be providing historical analysis of those practices in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, and focusing more on the role of ulama and the existing laws in those countries, leaving their analysis limited, which is not necessarily their fault because of how unique, and it time, strange the socio-cultural reality of Saudi Arabia. There is feminist critique of that period, the *sahwa*, and the following one, the current one, and

the changes in the role of women in the public life, their segregation, their right to education, to work, to gain and entertain autonomy, but not same-sex practices among men, and of course among women.

This lack of contemporary discussion in Islamic literature within the Arab intellectual sphere, especially the Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, of what the West later described as sexuality is what gave many scholars and thinkers to view it however they wish and see fit. From a test from Allah, to a mental illness, and even a desire that the person might be born with but still needs to not act upon it for some reason, “gayness” remains a Westernized concept that Muslims are ironically trying to “Muslimize” to either condemn it, if they’re scholars, thinkers and jurists, or have it faced with condemnation if they chose to use it to identify themselves.

The changeability of all Middle Eastern/Arab societies throughout several centuries, and texts from 7th century or 11th century being used broadly to discuss the current and present societies is causing some debates on how those texts and concepts can be applied in regard to sexual practices, homosexuality and sexuality in general. On the one hand, there’s Masaad who accuses orientalist of using seventh century Quran to study Muslims today (2002). And on the other hand, there’s those who Massad accuse of being “classic orientalist”, such as Arno Schmitt, that disagrees with Massad generalization claims. Schmitt, while acknowledging changeability, argues that he studies “I studied the culture, mode of production, mode of reproduction, social stratification, law” (2003) among other things, and how seventh century Muslims interpreted the Quran, without generalizing how they read it and using it today. With that,

he argues that “economic and social changes (industrialisation, entry of women into the public sphere, decreasing influence of the three-generation household),... the influence of western ideas (through colonial rule, tourists, media)... bring with them a change in the relationship between men and women and consequently in the sexual relationship between males” (Schmitt & Sofer, 1992). But exactly how did those factors influence same-sex practices among males in Saudi Arabia? Since the late 70’s and until the early 2000’s, Saudi had gone through what is known as the awakening movement, *sahwa*, right after the Grand Mosque seizure. So all of those changes and the influence of the western ideas were minimal. The changeability of the Saudi society during that time of course had an effect on the sexual practices of Saudi men. It is however, unclear just how much of an effect *sahwa* had on same-sex practices in Saudi Arabia, its spread and increased attempts to stop it from happening, with the latter using the common interpretation of the Quran using the story of the people Lut, and possibly anti-Westernization movements. All of this is the reason, although religious studies and the history of Islam and “homosexuality” is a part of it, this thesis is an attempt to map out same-sex practices in Saudi Arabia, rather than mapping out “homosexuality” is Islam.

This section of the third chapter, in a way, distinguishes between sexual practices and gender identity, which is what the next section will explain. Where many think of those practices as part of gender roles, gender and/or gender identity, socially and culturally structured and taken into consideration the amount of pressure those two factors put on one’s gender behavior to become a real “man” or a real “woman”, whether

people are looking at scripture or historical references, gender and practices are not necessarily related.

Gender/Identity

Islam focuses on gender in its scripture, and when the topic of relationships, like marriage, are brought up, they are discussed in a male/female context. From that one can sort of understand where some of the issues that rise when discussing same-sex activities are coming from. However, there is a great deal of confusion not only from those discussing, observing and sharing their disapproval of same-sex activities and gender identity, but those engaging in them as well.

A Hadith reported by Ibn Abbas says that the Prophet said Allah condemns men imitating, behaving or looking like women and women who do the same. What this Hadith does when used in regard to same-sex activities, and using the religious scripture that discusses intimate relationships that are exclusively between a man and a woman, it allows for some people, scholars, jurists or otherwise, to confuse a man who is engaging with same-sex activities and practices with another man, with someone who desires to become a transwoman in their gender identification/expression.

In a study that examined “gay” Iranian migrants, an interviewee described himself in a confusing way for the reader, which is very understandable given where he came from and the culture he associates with. Although not from an Arab country, but coming from a similar Middle Eastern background, confusing “sexuality” with “gender” is not unusual. It is very common for those engaging in same-sex activities, passive or active, penetrator or penetrated, to think of one’s gender as an indicator or influencer of one’s sexual behavior. In the study, the interviewee, while describing his struggle as a “gay” Muslim Iranian man, said that he no longer knew who he was, and that when he

looks in the mirror he saw someone he did not know, someone who looked “like a straight guy” to everyone, including himself. Although he “looked like a straight guy” he knew who he really was, he knew he was “gay, a woman basically, but it was always a man in the mirror” (Jaspal 2014).

What this man experiences is, again, very common. In a culture and a society that tells him what he does sexually does not work well with who he is as a man. This obviously changes with the role played by the individual in those sexual activities. From the interviewees wording and description, one can guess or assume that he is the “penetrated” in his same-sex activities. A Penetrator does not go through the same gender identity struggle, he does not question his position sexually, because whether he was engaging in male/male or male/female sexual activities, his role will be the same, the penetrator. For a penetrated person, however, the way he understands his gender and views his gender roles, sexually, changes and is affected by the culture and the society. This interviewee does not fully realize if he is a man attracted to other men sexually, or if he was born as male but desires to become a woman. He is a “gay” man who is also a “woman.”

To think of one’s own sexual desires and practices in such a way can help their “positive ingroup identification” (Yeck & Anderson, 2018). To separate the sexual act from the gender and/or to combine them allows for more leniency, socially and culturally, and perhaps legally. This can play out in a couple of different scenarios. If someone separates their sexual acts and genders, they can reaffirm and reassert their masculinity. This usually benefits the penetrator. If the penetrated, however, wishes to separate them,

it usually would not work in their favor because of the stigma that comes with being in that position. A potential escape from that stigma is to combine the sexual act with gender. Along with the cultural and social influence, they could convince themselves that they are in fact a woman, which explains their position and role in their sexual activities.

This area of sexual and gender confusion and gender sexual norms is completely ignored when “gay” and “queer” Muslims are studied and when same-sex practices are discussed. In the West, where some gay men refer to each other as she and her as a way for going against their gender norms and escaping it, Muslim men engaging in same-sex activities use female vocabulary to refer and describe the penetrated to accommodate their own gender norms.

The previous two sections discussed gender/identity and sexual practices and how they are perceived when mixed together, like when a man engages in same-sex activities and is penetrated in those activities, or takes on a more “female-like” role. The lack of research on the difference between sexual practices among and one’s gender has allowed for Western gay rights activists to get involved. This involvement has created a clash, a tension between what is local and what could be universalized.

Normalization: Tension between Universal Human/Gay Rights and Locality

Gay Rights as Human Right

The Western human rights discourse made sure to include the LGBTQAI+ community in the last 20-30 years in its efforts to globalize gay rights, of course avoiding or ignoring the HIV epidemic, and other human/gay rights violations in the West, and its effect on the same members of the same community it tries to globalize.

Human rights are a heavily debated issue. What are human rights? Who gets to define them? Who gets to implement them? How can they accommodate cultural, social, and religious differences? There are many answers to these questions, but nowadays it is very clear, when discussing human rights discourse, what human rights are and who gets to define them. The West. At least they think they are in that state of superiority that allows them to say what counts as human rights and what does not. It does not stop at that. Things quickly escalate sometimes when the West, most commonly the United States, does not agree with another country's "practices" toward a certain group of people. We see attempts to implement those human rights by making it a diplomatic issue and maybe politicians in the United States would pressure the government to cut funding and economic support for the country they believe is abusing and violating human rights.

In recent years, gay rights found its way into this. But what are gay rights exactly? There are many scholars, activists, advocates and politicians that gave us some ideas of what gay rights look like. Morris Kaplan argued for three primary categories that most gay rights fall under, which are, "1) decriminalization of homosexual activities

between consenting adults; 2) the prohibition of discrimination against lesbians and gay in employment, housing, education, and public accommodations; and 3) the legal and social recognition of the ethical status of lesbian and gay relationship and community institutions” (Kaplan, 1997). Moral and ethical states in the West highly criticize and threaten immoral and unethical regimes for how badly they treat their members of the LGBTQAI+ community. This completely disregards the fact that the ideas of gay rights and the LGBTQAI+ community are products of Western societies, they do not necessary exist in those countries that are being accused of human rights violations the same way the exist in the West.

Western, mostly white, gay rights activists tend to ignore the practices and beliefs of the people they are determined to liberate. They ignore the people, their needs, positions and focus on the government. They forget that how they criticize and fight those regimes and governments has a direct effect on those people they claim to want to liberate, and secure and protect their existence. They are so focused on the concept of liberation and fighting corrupt governments that they ignore those who are skeptical of the agenda behind the human rights/gay rights Western discourse. They constantly shift their focus to governments, claiming that LGBT rights “call into question governments’ authority to regulate morality for a purported social good” (Thoreson, 2014, p. 93), again focusing on making the issue of sex and same-sex practices, which happens privately without the knowledge of the government, an activist vs. government issue.

It is this kind of criticism that targets governments that results in actual harm to those individuals it claims to want to help. It never has a positive effect on their practices

and existence. Governments that do not go on those witch hunts targeting people engaging in same-sex practices, start doing so. Governments that do not have laws that specifically target and prosecute those who engage in same-sex practices start to have new laws (Massad, 2007). Those efforts to “improve” the living conditions of members of the LGBTQAI+ community globally, are not only questionable because of the damage they do and the success they do not achieve, their imperialist efforts and assumptions they make, but because they are attempting to globalize something that is far from being perfect or ideal domestically.

Western countries, like the United States, are still struggling, if they are actually trying, to protect transmen and transwomen not only from the public, but from institutions of the government itself, like police and police biases and violence against them, among other things. So when people start to think of how those other Western states wish to protect gay rights overseas it becomes very clear that it is less about actual rights, actual protection, and more about dominance, superiority and imperialism.

Not only is this strange need to globalize and universalize domestic identity politics problematic to those local individuals the West claims need protection and saving and could result in endangering them by making them targets, it only erases their own pre-Western existence. One can debate the intentions behind the globalization of gay rights and their role in “promoting local sexual differences”, but “the emergence, visibility, and legibility of these difference are often predicated in globalizing discourses on a developmental narrative in which a pre-modern, pre-political, non-Euro-American queerness must consciously assume the burdens of representing itself to itself and others

as ‘gay’ in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity and global modernity” (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan IV, 2002). Same-sex practices are not modern. Gayness and queerness are, and yet, people everywhere need to subscribe to gayness and queerness and what they represent to exist today, unless left unbothered by Western gay/human rights discourse.

Normalization

While Middle Eastern, Arab and Muslim countries and societies look at normalization as accepting “homosexuality” as something normal, something that could exist without ethical and moral judgments, what normalization looks like and means to some members of the LGBTQAI+ community, activist and politicians in the West is slightly different.

Still advocating for society to consider homosexuality something normal, Western gays and gay rights activists try to normalize homosexuality by copying heteronormativity and its lifestyle aspects (Warner, 1999). Marriage and having a family are the most common of those heteronormative lifestyle defining features. To seek that is not the issue, to think of that as a norm is not an issue is well, it is when what a group of people, some gays in this instance in the United States and other European countries, tell other groups of people, those engaging in same-sex practices in other parts of the world, that this is how “gay” people everywhere can achieve dignity, is to be like the “heterosexuals”, the “straights.”

For different-sex practices, the goal is to have a family, to have kids. This of course is when the couple are married if they're Muslims, and married or not if they are non-Muslims, ideally. And of course, there is sex for pleasure and pleasure only, which both same-sex and different-sex entertain. This leave the institution of marriage completely irrelevant to those engaging in same-sex activities. Marriage assumes there is more than physical needs and desires to same-sex practices at all times.

What Western gay/human rights activists and advocates are doing is promoting heteronormative gayness as the normal for all of those engaging in same-sex practices around the world creating a confusing discourse that chooses how to promote sexual liberation and freedoms when criticizing Muslims for limiting sex to the institution of marriage between man and woman, and when to promote the importance of marriage when it is not even needed or requested.

CHAPTER FOUR

Navigating Faith and Sexual Practices: Personal Reflections

I claim to be religious. I practice, I am very conscious to what I say and do, and never assume I fully and completely understand everything about Islam, my religion. If I can say one thing about the last 2 years, when I started working on, or thinking about my thesis and research question and all the readings that came with it, is that most, if not all Muslims are the same. People practice. People engage with scriptures, fatwas and what is taught as Islamic. A lot of us in places like Saudi Arabia are afraid to ask question because we were taught that what men with beards tell us, what books that have been approved say is what Islam is. Too many questions can raise eyebrows. Too many eyebrows for some reason. Ironically, we were also taught that Abraham destroyed the devotional images or idols that his people used to worship because when he asked them why they were worshipping something that does not move, something that's not alive, they claimed it was because they inherited these practices, and their faith, from their parents. We are taught that what Abraham's people inherited is wrong, and yet, we continue to inherit our faith, and we do not ask too many, or any questions because this is what those before us said is right and this is what they used to do.

This is not a claim, however, that I have not inherited anything. I am a product of my society, my culture, my upbringing, a certain socio-economic class, and so on. Of course I inherited, as well as affected by, practices and beliefs. What this research helped do is question what I inherited. Interrogate it. See if it makes sense to me today. It may or

may not have made sense before, and may or may not make sense in the next year. And that is fine. Allah, after all, did say, “O humanity have been given but little knowledge” (17:85), and that includes religion.

The last chapter examined the scholarly work regarding same-sex activities, practices and intimacy, gayness and all other Islamic and Western factors that play into how one views and feels about them today. In this chapter I will use my experience, practices, and beliefs to discuss same-sex activities. It is a limited discussion in that it is limited to my own experience. I may share things I saw someone else do or say, but it is also what I saw and heard, how I understand the action and the words that came out of them. It is my story, and it makes no accusation of how religious or not someone else is, nor does it make the claim to be shared by others. If it does, then it is someone else’s story to tell and share, or to be explored in another study.

I cannot explain how I navigate faith and my sexual practices without going through how I understand religion and religiosity. I am Muslim, but how religious am I? Am I religious? I think I know the answer, but I assume it’s not something that necessarily needs an answer, but rather experienced and felt. I also assume that everyone thinks of themselves as religious, but some could only use how they “perform” religion, as in praying, fasting, and so on, as evidence for their religiosity, which is part of it. But, can I be religious if I knowingly commit what I, sometimes, or most of the times, consider a sin? That’s where religiosity becomes complicated, and what the next section will discuss.

Religion/Religiosity

Religion is more than simply saying you are of this religion or that. You are not Muslim just because you say your religion is Islam. There are things that make up a Muslim. You also do not stop being a Muslim for committing a sin. There are several ways religion can manifest itself in our lives, but for some reasons people limit who gets to be a Muslim to what is seen, to what is thought would make them considered Muslims. It is believed that Prophet Mohammed said, as reported by Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, that the difference between us, Muslims, and them, non-Muslims, is *salat*, prayers, he who abandons it is an infidel. This tells us that practices, like praying, are a vital to Islam, just like practices are vital to any other religion. Practices, however, do not tell us just how religious a person is.

People somehow managed to come up with other criteria to determine who is religious and who is not simply by what is seen. Some Muslims are at a point that sins are the human scale of religiosity, something that Allah knows about. No one knows what goes on in the heart of a Muslim, regardless if they practice or not, regardless if they are consistent or not, but Allah. Some Muslims forgot that Muslims can be, and are, sinners, just like any other group of people. Muslims are not angels. Muslims are not chosen or special like Prophets. Muslims commit sins. Hint why Allah emphasized forgiveness. Why come up with a concept such as forgiveness if sins are the end of a Muslim? Why create Hell if all Muslims are sinless? Wouldn't it make sense to leave us all in Heaven? Even Adam made a mistake. It did not make him any less of a believer.

Religiosity is what keeps a Muslim continuously seeking forgiveness for all sins. There are many ways to define religiosity. It could be the “full comprehension and individual experience about religious teaching or belief”, a “condition in the inside of an individual” that motivates them to act and behave according to what religion asks of them and tells them to do (Warsah & Imorn, 2019) or a simply how important the religion is in one’s life and religious activity (Yeck & Anderson, 2018), and could be measured by looking at belief, ritual, devotion, experience, and knowledge (El-Menouar, 2014).

What one can get from all definition and measures of religiosity in Islam is how can others view and determine your religiosity. It has nothing to do with who you really are because those cannot be measured by anyone other than yourself, and of course Allah. You can pray without washing up and all people can see is someone who is praying, which will make some consider you religious. You can pretend to fast when you are not actually fasting. You can lie. You can do different things that would help your religious image. And that is the problem, Muslims need to present a religious image, which has different standards in different societies and cultures. In the gulf religion it could be simply wearing a hijab or covering your face. In countries like Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Syria it could be dressing up modestly. And there’s a pattern here. There’s a pattern for the concept of religious image, it is very gender-based. Women’s religiosity can be easily measured by what they wear.

Men in some places can have those religious appearances defining features. For some time it was a long beard and a short *thoub*. Muslims get some of those features from what the Prophet used to look like and wore. Muslims treated them as something as

essential as praying, fasting..etc. But the fact is, you can have a long beard and not be a “good” Muslim, and not have one and not be a “bad” Muslim. Unfortunately, some Muslims just need something to base our judgments on. And appearances are the easiest ones to use.

Since religiosity is understood in terms of understanding the religion and its beliefs, and is measured by practices, devotions, among other things, morality and ethics in Islam can be measured by how religious someone is. As a Muslim, you are obligated to donate and help those in need, you are to take care of others, to not kill, not harm, not lie, and so on. It is easily noticeable where the accusation of immorality of some sinners is coming from. Because some Muslims pay so much attention to how good you are physically doing, in the physical world, a somewhat materialistic view of religiosity. You do something bad, or someone sees you doing something bad, or something considered bad, you are immoral and lack ethics. It’s as simple as that. However, your heart and what it holds is almost always ignored.

Something all Muslims would agree on is that what is commonly referred to as the “door of forgiveness”, which refers to Allah’s forgiveness, is always open, until, *Yawm Al Qiyamah*, Judgment Day or Day of Resurrection. A verse from Surah Al Zumar, chapter 39 in the Quran, states that, “Say, O Prophet, that Allah says, O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not lose hope in Allah’s mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins. He is indeed the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (39: 53). When Allah says he forgives everything, and is waiting for his servants to seek forgiveness, Muslims themselves consider sins to be the end of one’s

religiosity. This of course varies and changes depending on the type of sin and who commits it, but does not make it any less absurd.

One of those sins that are considered highly immoral and unethical, and allows for the religiosity of those committing it to be questioned is same-sex practices. Oddly enough, it is the only one I can think of where a huge number of Muslims when speaking of make sure to say that it causes Allah's throne shakes, as a sign of how horrifying and horrendous it is, something that has no basis in Sunnah, and of course not basis in the Quran. But one can see why people engaging in same-sex practices are out-casted, and considered immoral. When some Muslims, and even *Muftis*, think they are so immoral, so evil, and so bad, that they cause something so majestic as Allah's throne to shake, it would not seem unimaginable to consider killing them for their actions. No other sin has the ability to do this to Allah's throne. Not killing an innocent soul, not rape, no kind of abuse, physical or mental.

Muslim sinners, if those engaging in same-sex activities and practices sinners are considered sinners, are like any other Muslim sinners that drink alcohol, engage in *zina*, different-sex practices, and so on, they are just sinners. They can still pray, fast, do good deeds, seek forgiveness and do everything that other Muslims not committing the same sin can do. Among your fellow Muslims, you are still a Muslim. You are not inferior. This is what those engaging in same-sex practices deserve, and yet this is what they are denied. They are denied basic attachment to their faith. Their faith and religiosity is questioned and becomes suspicious for some reason.

I never stopped being a Muslim. I will never stop being a Muslim. I do not imagine a scenario, involving same-sex practices or not, where I would not be a Muslim. I am probably more religious now than I was 8-10 years ago. I do not justify what I do. And I think this is a great reminder that I am still on the safe side. Part of seeking forgiveness is knowing, or at least feeling you did something wrong. And I do. I feel like I am doing something wrong when I engage in those activities. I cannot deny that feeling, and I will not lie to myself about it. And the reason I say I believe I still consider myself on the safe side is because a verse that states that, “Allah has sealed their hearts and their hearing, and their sight is covered. They will suffer a tremendous punishment” (2:7). Allah forgives those who seek Him for forgiveness. Allah forgives those who acknowledge their sins. Those mentioned in the verse, those who Allah “sealed their hearts” are those who no longer believe what they’re doing is wrong, who never remember Him.

There is no way any of us can say for sure their hearts are not sealed. No one can say for sure they are still worthy of forgiveness. However, guilt, I believe, is an indicator of that. If you are not feeling guilty for committing a sin or doing something bad, you are slightly further away from seeking, and perhaps receiving forgiveness than those feeling guilt. It is probably the only thing Muslims have in common with Catholics. I feel guilty when I engage in same-sex practices. It’s the result of everything I was taught, experienced, and where I currently am, religiously. This, however does not make me inferior, less than or not a Muslim.

An assumption that is always made when it comes to people, for lack of a better word, judging a sinner, is the assumption that you could stop whenever you want, you just choose not to. It's an assumption that thinks of humans, Muslims or not, as stronger than they actually are. Weakness is part of the human experience, and the religious experience is no exception. If you are lucky, you might eventually, at some point, somewhere in your life, be able to stop committing something you believe is a sin. This is not the case for everyone. When some Muslims discuss same-sex practices they think of them in terms of habit, something you get used to doing or practicing. Which could be true. But pleasure is still part of it. One does not intentionally do something, with no influence from anyone or anything, if some sort of pleasure is not involved. People seek pleasures, and sexual activities provide some of those physical pleasures. Those pleasures are discussed in both religious and heavenly reward terms, and earthly pleasure ones. If you don't go through the most common outcome which is masturbation, chances are you will have an outcome through a sexual relationship of some sort.

As what can be described as an organized religion, Islam is organized in its practices and some of its rituals, but the road to *Iman*, to faith, to the different ways a person can be religious are less organized. They are, in fact, chaotic. They require searching, learning and self-reliance as well as relying on your community. There is a huge deal of personal responsibility in Islam, and overcoming a sin, or even living with one, or two, or a hundred, requires you to be aware of that. It's an unusual balance of community involvement and personal responsibility. Us Muslims are all working hard and doing our best to meet Him, God, Allah, to see His face. And that journey that leads

to seeing His face, that desire, which we all seek, is a sign of how everyone has a responsibility to do so on their own, (Rippin, 2009), because we won't have the same journey in seeking the face of Allah.

People cannot be truly religious if they lack freedom. This kind of freedom is what Saba Mahmood describes as positive freedom, which includes self-government and self-mastery (Mahmood, 2005). Of course it's almost impossible to achieve that level of freedom because, "in order for an individual to be free, her actions must be the consequence of her 'own will' rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion" (p. 11) and Muslims, or people in general, are influenced by all of those. But to experience religiosity, their effect has to be reduced. So, people won't enjoy and entertain self-government and -mastery completely but a decent amount that would allow them to experience religion individually, as well as being part of a group, of a community.

Religion and religiosity is never brought up when I'm having sex with someone. It's either ignored or simply irrelevant to what we are doing. It's ignored because we, at least I, know we are doing something considered by at least one of us a sin but sexual desires in so many cases takes over the "reasonable" and "religious" thinking of doing things. We are both, at that moment, not thinking of the religious and not religious. And that's something that both same- and different-sex encounters tend to do. Religiosity is relevant before and after, but never during the activity, which is not unusual I guess. I always think of religion and Allah before and after, but during, it's a quest to fulfil a desire. It has nothing to do with how religious I am. I could have just prayed, or broke my

fasting, and went to meet someone right after to have sex. I could have sex and come back home, and feel so bad, sometimes, that I pray and seek forgiveness.

The only time religion, or religiosity to be precise, was invoked is when I was 17, in high school, during the week so I must have skipped school that day, or it was the end of the semester before finals so I left school early, and I scheduled a hookup. And that's how hookups happen in Saudi. They are never spontaneous. They are scheduled so you would have some sort of an alibi if you are a teenager in high school. And for everyone, honestly. Spontaneity is never a thing. Every sexual encounter is thought out, it's planned, because it's more likely to happen with a stranger. And that's who my hookup was. A stranger I met online, like most sexual encounters in Saudi Arabia. He was at least 12 years my senior. Very masculine, like all other men who take on the penetrator role. Not "straight passing" because he wasn't gay nor straight. He was engaging in a same-sex activity to fulfil a desire. He was just a Saudi man who wanted to have sex. I got into his car and he drove off. When him and I parked in front of a hotel to get a room, I couldn't do it. I cannot say that I was afraid of Allah. I cannot say I did not want to have sex with him because of religion. I don't know why I didn't. I just knew what him and I were planning on doing must not happen. Maybe I was physically afraid as I wasn't sexually active. I stepped out of the car when he went inside the hotel, and in a moment of panic started running. Minutes later I saw him driving around looking for me. I did not know what to do so I went back and got into his car and asked him to drive away, to take me home. I was out of breath, not terrified, but scared. He kept asking me what was wrong, why did I run. I made up a lie that I saw a cousin. I know, as I knew back then, that he did

not believe me, but he went along. He did not care. If it wasn't me, I'm sure it would have been someone else who he would have sex with. It wasn't so much about the person he was about to penetrate as it was about penetrating someone, anyone. On our way back to where he picked me up, he suggested I give him oral sex. It wasn't full penetration, but it was something for him for his trouble and time. I could not. I just wanted to go home and forget about this incident. He tried to persuade me, but I nicely asked that he just take me back home. It was then that religiosity was provoked. He asked me if I prayed. If I pray. Never in my life, before or after that incident has anyone asked me if I pray or did anything else Muslims do. For some reason he thought the reason I did not want to have sex with him is because I had a religious and/or spiritual awakening. Maybe he was right. But it was then that I knew people do think about things like that. Some Muslims do think about Allah. Some Muslims do think about how religious someone is even when they are doing the same thing. It's just no one ever said it out loud like he did. And when he asked me that, I believe he felt guilty, even though him and I didn't do anything. He saw me as someone who made a mistake, even though, from a religious point of view, my religious point of view at least, he was making the same mistake as well, but he thought of me as someone good who made a mistake, a good, religious person, who made a mistake, or was about to make a mistake. He did not feel guilty for wanting to have sex, I don't think so. I believe he felt guilty he was going, or persuaded me to have sex with me.

Muslims cannot take guilt, regret and seeking forgiveness out of the Muslim experience and expect them to live without a single sin. Muslims cannot expect other Muslims to be angels and prophets. I don't drink, I don't consume anything that Islam

forbids, but I engage in a sexual practice believed to be a sin. I pray, I fast, and I have visited Mecca for Umrah, and hopefully for Hajj one day. I believe in Muhammed, Jesus and Moses, in the Quran, Bible and Torah, in Heaven and Hell, in angels, judgment day and the afterlife. Religiosity takes many shapes and forms. Self-responsibility and freedoms are guaranteed for Muslims, and are given to us the second we are created but are taken away from us the moment we become “members of a community”, and that community could be a society within a country or the whole country. Muslims are expected to have better self-control and yet are monitored, constantly being watched in our daily lives, pressured to appear to be more religious. There is a positive relationship between the visible and seen acts of religiosity, “such as regularly attending services, engaging in sustained prayer/meditation, enacting religiously prescribed behaviors, avoiding religiously proscribed behaviors, and monitoring behavior to ensure compliance with the standards of one’s faith” (Watterson & Giesler, 2012) but those only “hypothesize” our religiosity and self-regulating, (p. 195). Without the freedom to experience religion in however way one sees fit, without the ability to make mistakes even, self-regulating and self-control can be the product of our fear of what other people will say and do to us if, and not a fear of Him, which is not the goal of self-control, self-regulation and religiosity. The way Islam is practiced differs, that is why in Islam there are 77 branches of *Iman*, faith (Sahih Bukhari). We are all Muslims, but how faithful we are is not the same and cannot be measured by anyone other than Allah. Can anyone say they have not sinned? Absolutely not. So why do you consider yourself more of a Muslim than I am and deserve forgiveness and not me? No one can say they are

more Muslim than someone else, and we all deserve and shall receive forgiveness for every *Kabira* and *Saghira*, major and minor sins.

Religion and religiosity have no basis if not engaged in scripture and tradition, accepting, rejecting or challenging them. The reason people think of religion, and experience religiosity differently is because people read and believe the Quran and hadith differently, based on several factors, like our gender and, in this case, sexual practices. I choose to challenge some mainstream and mostly agreed on interpretations of the Quran and some of the things claimed to be said by the Prophet, and in the next chapter it will be seen how I interpret and find myself in its different verses and reporting, especially those addressing same-sex practices, if possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

My Scripture: I, too, can read

It has always been troubling to me how a majority of Muslims rely on our own reading and interpretation of the Quran almost never, and expect someone else to tell us what the Quran is saying. Interpretation is something to be studied, I understand that. But, how can a book for the masses not be so easily read by the masses? The Quran is not so hard to read and understand. It does require some work. But also requires paying attention. We read. We only read. We recite when we pray, on Fridays and in Ramadan. We do not, however, pay attention to what we are reading and reciting. It's almost like how in school we are required to memorize verses, suras, poems and even equations in math. I am guilty for doing that. I am guilty for memorizing, reciting, and reading the Quran, and not understanding and paying attention to what I am reading most of the time.

Both the Quran and Hadith require historical knowledge and awareness of context, relevance and authenticity. The linguistic aspect itself is a very important one to understand the meaning behind every verse in the Quran. Hadith is studied not only in religious context, as in what the hadith itself is saying, but the way it was reported, who reported, which is known as *Sanad* or *Isnad* referring to the chain of narrators. The personal characteristics of the person claiming to have heard the Prophet said what they are reporting is also a factor that plays into the authenticity of a hadith.

My Quran

In Saudi, we learned about Lut in elementary school. It was in the *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence book. Not a whole chapter, but a small section of a chapter in the book. When I think about how small that section was, I think of the irony of it. How can an issue like same-sex practices be discussed in less than 15 lines? It's almost like it was so clear how Islam handle it, and how Muslims should feel about it. This is what your religion says about it and this is how you should feel about it. It is *haram*. So we move on to the next section, which was probably *zina*, fornication.

I did not revisit the verses discussing what the people of Lut did until three years ago, and did not start interrogating the mainstream and common interpretations of it until mid-2019 when I had a research question. In school, we were taught that the people of Lut committed what became known as *liwat*, which is basically to men having sex. As we read the verses, and as our teacher interprets them, given the words chosen to tell this story in the Quran, it is very clear what happened and what is the *hukum* or *hukm*, the ruling in this matter is.

I believed the interpretation, which I may not completely agree with today, but I never understood the ruling. One of the many questions which I thought were inappropriate to be said out loud was why two people sleeping together would be such a problematic matter. We learned that a man and a woman can get married and that's when they can have sex. But what about two men? At that point, two women having sex was a thought that has not yet crossed my mind, and the Quran does not have a story to go with it.

How I understand interpretation is sort of complicated. Although I believe that it is a hard task, which is why there are people who study and learn exegesis. I also believe it is very personal. There are verses that most can agree on what they mean, and there are ones that can be interpreted differently and different factors play into that, like gender, socio-economic status, and so on. This can be seen when interpreting the verses explaining inheritance in Islam. The verse says that one male has the share of two females. Not all women agree. Some agree that this does not apply to all cases. And others interpret differently. Almost all, however, men take this verse the way it is written in the Quran they are holding. They are getting twice the amount their sister is getting. This is an example of how who someone is in their societies can have an effect on how they read and interpret the Quran. It is a personal process.

What I understand from the story is that it does not necessarily speaks to same-sex intimacy. The story, how I read and interpret it at least, is about the prophet Lut and his people who did not believe in his Prophethood. Like other prophets, a miracle, something unusual was introduced to the storyline. I believe that the two angels who visited the village and Lut are this miracle. Not many can have angels visit them like that. Lut's people's reaction, like many unbelievers before them, was violent. They attacked the guests, the angels. It was the men of the village who attacked and sexually assaulted the angels, and raped them. They raped Lut's guests. They raped two angels. This is horrendous and the reaction of Lut is evident of how extremely horrifying this is. He offered to give his people his daughters just so they would stop sexually assaulting and raping his guests, the angels.

When Allah said that the people of Lut did something that no one ever did before I do believe it refers to some sort of same-sex activity. I do not, however, believe it was intimate or consensual. It was rape. It was two angels who were sexually assaulted. That is something that no one has ever done before the people of Lut. Other scholars and people advocating for same-sex practices to be accepted and accommodated might use this as an opportunity to cite the Quran for not explicitly condemning same-sex practices, which is true. There isn't a single verse that could be used to explicitly condemn same-sex practices, if, and only if, you read and interpret the story of Lut as a story that condemns sexual violence and assault. This is not very common.

Those condemning same-sex practices choose to cite and reference verses that speak of different-sex intimacy and sexual practices. The Quran does refer to sexual practices in terms of marriage. When jurists and scholars condemn same-sex practices they make the argument that reproduction can only happen in a man/female relationship, when married, and a couple verses can attest to that, like "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another" (49:13), although "get to know each other could mean different things. But people are nonetheless created from a male and a female, so reproduction, which is very important in Islam, cannot happen outside of that. This argument is used to reinforce "the organic biological and physiological realities of paradigmatically heterosexual acts" (Vaid, 2018).

I cannot use the Quran, or any aspect of Islam for that matter, to describe my religion as a "sex-positive" religion, like Kugle would argue (2003). I also cannot think

of anything in all three monotheistic religions that would indicate their positive reaction toward sexual practices. What I can do, however, and what I believe the Quran can be used for is the fact that sexual acts are, if considered haram, forbidden, are punished by Allah. There are verses, like the ones mentioned in Chapter 2 *Policing Sin*, that speak of how there is nothing Muslims can do, and how Muslims cannot force people to believe in what they do not want to believe in. "So continue to remind all, O Prophet, for your duty is only to remind, you are not there to compel them to believe" (88:21-22) is a reminder that even by committing a sinful act, like same-sex practices if considered a sin, there isn't much for those condemning to do other than to remind me that is a sin, and that I should not do it.

Although not a sex-positive take on the Quran, but it made me realize the level of individualism given to us when it comes to everything, including earthly pleasures such as sexual intercourse. I get to do what I want, as long as it's not hurting anyone, and it's not public, and I, again, if considered a sin, am responsible for its consequences, in the Afterlife. Those who remind other Muslims that what they are committing is considered a sin are rewarded, they are still doing something good. Me, or someone else continuing to commit sins is not a reflection of how poorly you performed your duty of reminding yourself and others of what you believe is right and wrong, it is a reflection of my freedom, granted by Allah, to do anything that does not negatively affect others.

This level of individualism is not new to Islam. Other verses in the Quran, and in Islamic Tradition altogether, refer to how people are responsible for what they do. Individuals are responsible for what they individually do. Good or bad. Muslims, are

brought into the Afterlife not even worried about our parents, our children, any of our loved ones, we do not give a *hasana*, good deed, to them even if they desperately need it. Islam's community and social responsibility do not contradict its individualism.

My interpretation of the Quran, specifically the verses that mentions the story of Lut, is somewhat influenced by "Western" scholars and advocates seeking accommodations and answers from the Quran regarding same-sex activities and intimacy. It also influenced by my upbringing in a country, in a culture that views same-sex activities as wrong, forbidden, taboo..etc. It's my reading of the verses, accompanied by how others have read it, how others have interpreted and used that interpretation.

In the Quran, reading and interpreting the story of Lut and other verses, I will not find something that speaks so positively about sexual freedoms and tolerance of same-sex activities. I will also not find something that condoms them the same way that is commonly understood. I can, however, find verses and reminders that I do enjoy a great amount of individualism and freedom to do what I wish to do. It is a different form of sexual freedom. It does not assume its legitimacy, or necessarily condemn it in some cases. It could be right and it could be wrong. I myself am undecided.

Hadith

As some might argue that modern interpretations of the Quran is attempting to make Islam more peaceful and tolerant than it actually is to appeal to the West, referring to Prophet Mohammed can give us a closer look to a more lived experience rather than attempting to understand scripture.

Every Muslim will agree that Prophet Mohammed is an example who preaches justice, compassion, and love. In his lifetime, he was surrounded by people and things he did not agree with, and there is no evidence that he ever attempted to forcefully change them or attacked them because of their differences in times of peace. He told his followers in times of war not to harm a fly, not to cut a tree, he reminded them to take care of their neighbors no matter how close or far away, Muslims or not, so it makes no sense for him to demand that those committing what the people of Lut did be killed. He might have condemned them, as he did with other sinners committing other sins, but never said kill someone for committing a sin.

I can see how a hadith condemning the doing of the people of Lut and those who do the same could be considered authentic and a reliable source, as what Lut's people did is condemned in the Quran. This will bring us back to the debate on what the condemnation is about exactly, same-sex practices in general, or rape and sexual violence. Other stories reported about the Prophet's tolerance are evidence that he would never seek the death penalty for something like same-sex practices.

Another reason why the reported hadith where he said to kill those who do what the people of Lut did is not believable is because there are no reported stories or incidents of same-sex practices among Muslims during the time of Prophet, in either Mecca or Medina. There are stories and reporting about effeminate men, but nothing about same-sex practices. So why would the Prophet talk about something that was not an issue at the time? And why would he reveal its punishment?

Muslim cannot say for sure the Prophet said this or that, but what is known about him can give some insight to what could be considered realistic. I personally cannot think of a scenario where the Prophet would punish a sinner with capital punishment, unless they commit murder. And as we are constantly reminded to be more like the Prophet and to try to follow in his footsteps, not only in his religiosity and religious practices, but in the way he lived everyday life, the way he treated others, I remind myself that yes, he might have condemned same-sex practices, but he would never physically hurt those who engage in those practices.

Validation in the Scripture

The more I read different kinds of religious scriptures, and different interpretations of those scriptures, the more I realize I don't see my sexual practices in the majority of them, or in the ones I believe and trust in at least. There is no validation for it. I, too, just like Kugle, attempted for a second to justify what I do and how I "behave" sexually, but it's impossible, at least in the way I read the scripture, the way I understood and interpreted it.

The reason I recognize "homosexuality" or same-sex practices as a sinful act is because I don't see what would make me think otherwise in the Quran or Sunnah. I see myself in the Quran as a Muslim, doing good and committing sins. All the teachers, family members, friends, and strangers whoever told me that same-sex practices upset Allah so much that His throne would shake so vigorously they made me feel bad and ashamed, although what they were saying wasn't directed to me but about the topic in

general, as many Muslims like to do when they don't want to debate a topic, they just go to what they believe is the punishment of the sin or act as a sign of how debating it is unnecessary.

Some might find comfort in knowing there are homoerotic writings by Muslim poets and writers in different regions of the Muslim world, I was introduced to them at a point in my life where how I view my practices is no longer something that might change. I may not necessarily view the story of Lut as clear evidence but I still acknowledge that the how it was men engaging in some sort of sexual practices, rape or consensual, with other men wasn't accidental. If the same-sex practice aspect of the story wasn't of any significance, why not say they raped women? Why emphasize gender? My gender and the gender of the person I have sex with matters.

Although my gender matters and it helps me understand the nature of what I am doing as referenced in the Quran, the holy book does not give me a perfect image of what or who I am, not sexually, but as a Muslim. Muslims cannot read the Quran and expect to have all the answers to what being a Muslim is like. It gives me signs, it gives me the foundation of how to embark on a journey, one of many, that could lead me to realize who I am as a Muslim, what it actually means to be a Muslim. I could reach my destination of the level of knowledge and realization, but it was never guaranteed. This will always give me the reminder that I experience Islam differently, through different journeys and exist as Muslims differently. I never felt perfect as a Muslim. I never felt superior in any way and capacity. I never claimed to be perfect. Allah did not create us in

his image, he created us as human beings who could easily sin. And it's He who said, "O humanity have been given but little knowledge" (17:85).

CHAPTER SIX

What to Call Me?

Why Use Labels?

There is a good reason why same-sex practices and those who engage in them are hard to be labelled and named in the Arab and Muslim world, and that's because labels regarding sex and sexuality are a product of Western societies. They hold no meanings, or lose some or even all of their meanings once translated. They are not universal, no matter how much Western white gay rights advocates claim they are.

Terms like homo, queer and gay were stigmatized and used by the state, and those in society who oppose abnormal sexual activities. This indicates those activities' publicity and normalization efforts. Muslims and Arabs don't have a term to describe what the West describes as heterosexual relationship in Arabic, because sexual activities are not, or were not public, they are not part of a movement or identity politics. People engage in all kinds of sexual activities privately or the places designated for those activities. Sexual desires were not a movement, and they did not determine who or what a person is.

In the West, with human rights movements, gay rights joined in and reclaimed those terms and used them to identify, proudly and publicly. Those terms were radicalized and used politically to "organize political mobilization to strive for more visibility, legal rights, and equality" (Lisdonk, Nencel & Keuzenkamp, 2017), all were things not of concern to many Muslims and Arabs.

Muslims, Arabs, and/or Middle Easterners are communities. This idea already exists. People, Muslims and/or Arabs are born into it. They are, for the most part, do not seek to be part of a group of people, of a community. They, sometimes, actually try to leave the group they are associated with and what they represent, their cultures, ideas and beliefs. The West is not like that. Their individuality is social, unlike the religious individualism of a Muslim. You are born into a family. Many don't experience the idea of being part of a community. And by many, it refers to white people. Terms and labels bring people together. If you identify as gay, lesbian, queer, or any other LGBTQA+ identity, you become a member of the LGBTQA+ community. You start to get a sense of what belonging to a community feels like. Some Muslims are automatically members of a community, and for many of us it's this big umbrella of the Muslim community. There are different branches, Sunni, Shia, different Arab and/or Middle Eastern Muslim groups and so on. But some Muslims are not seeking that sense of belonging, because they experience it right away. It could be experienced positively or negatively, just like being a member of the LGBTQA+ community. But it's that sense of belonging and community that many in the West seek out and hope to find for several reasons, rejection of their same-sex activities being one of them.

Now, the whole idea of Muslims being a community is not new. However, it has developed, politically and socially. Nowadays, some of us are born into it, and since the community is built into the larger community that is the country if you live in a country like Saudi Arabia, and you are Sunni, leaving the community becomes a challenge if you ever think of doing so. To some of us Muslims, the reason we choose to stay part of the

community we are born into is because of fear. We don't enjoy the freedom of moving around from one community to another. So, the idea of being a member of a community is something that perhaps we all share, and experience, negatively or positively. And since the freedom to move around, to participate in different forms and shapes of existence is not guaranteed, maybe that's why a lot of "queer" Muslims tend to stay part of the Muslim community, especially if they are still in the Muslim and Arab worlds. Maybe the way Westerners move around and experience different communities is problematic, which is the concept of identification labels, but the actual exercise of moving is positive.

I have those labels, Saudi, Muslim, Sunni, Arab..etc, but they are not by choice, even though they sort of tell you who I am and to which "community" I belong. But I was born into them, I don't have a problem with them, most of the time, and that might be a privilege that a lot of members of the LGBTQA+ community in the West don't have, which is why they are so determined to have their own community, shaped however they see fit. I guess, in a way, I have not experienced choosing a community, because I accepted the one(s) I was born into

Terms are labels, they are identity labels in the West. For someone who is not a Westerner, with a limited vocabulary that can be used as identity labels, usually associated with where you are from, what kind of an Arab you are, your religious affiliation, that usually tells you who I am as a member of a community, of a society, but not necessarily as individual, terms and labels such as homosexual, gay, queer, and so on, hold no meaning to me. When I find myself using them because someone asked me

something or because I found myself in an environment or a society that “requires” I identify myself, as individual, in terms of who I am when it comes to gender and sexuality, I will use them but those kinds of tools of identification, they will never affirm something about my “identity”, they will produce an image of an identity to those demanding identification (Bhabha, 2004). That image is an already established one to Westerners. It will continue to assume things based on the identification term and/or label needed to exist in the West. It limits one’s existence to that identification label. It Westernized the person, whether they choose to do so or not, whether they like it or not. Once you’re identified as gay, or homo, you are that. You no longer have the ability to define gay in your own understanding of what the term means to you, and not what it means to the others.

Terms.. there are so many

It is safe to say that, although in English they refer to both the physical and emotional attraction, none of the terms, when translated to Arabic and discussed regarding Muslims same-sex activities include the emotional attraction. It’s a romantic relationship. It lacks emotions. It only refers to physical, sexual activity. Whenever same-sex activities are debated, the references from the religion, as well as the social and cultural norms only focus on the physical activity.

The fact that all the terms when translated to Arabic or even used as they are in English only focus on the body and the sexual practice, the physical desire and the emotional one, might be a reason so many Muslim men and women engaging in

same-sex activities prefer to use the terms “gay” and “lesbian” is to affirm that this is not only about the sexual desire and physical activity, but also an emotional, romantic relationship and attraction. The story of Lut does not mention anything about emotions, it was simply physical. There is nothing in any religious scripture there references an incident or a story where a man or a woman with emotionally in love with someone from the same sex.

This also makes it clear that for people in the Middle East and the Arab world, it’s not simply a religious issue, because even Christians in the region share the same intolerance toward those engaging in same-sex activities. It’s part of the culture, it is a matter of what is considered normal and abnormal. And for Arabs and many Middle Easterners, same-sex activities are abnormal. And that sort of put an end to the conversation, which is why some Muslims in the Arab world don’t see any debates on the emotional attraction aspect of it. It could also be that some assume that all same-sex activities are based on emotional attraction. So, whether it was based on the irrelevance of emotion in those activities or the assumption that all activities are based on emotional attraction, emotions and romance are not yet explored enough in same-sex activities among Muslims, Arabs and Middle Easterners.

The difference, or one of the differences of using the terms, is the time and space. I can use the word “gay” in Saudi Arabia and the Tempe, Arizona, and they would mean different things to people. If I were to say “I’m gay” in Saudi Arabia, the word would be stuck at the sexual activity. It would not become an identification label. It will be limited in what it means. I am gay, as in I am a man who is having sex with other men. I am not

confused about my gender. For “men” who are penetrated by other men, and who dress up and have soft and feminine appearances, in the Arab world, unfortunately, the terms used are “shemale”, “tranny” and even “ladyboy”. For a while, *Jins Thalith*, third gender was used a lot to describe those men who take on the passive role in same-sex activities, which would have given us more room to discuss same-sex activities in regard to gender and what that could potentially mean for those with gender nonconforming identities. With the idea of the third gender, intentionally or not, in Saudi Arabia, and some of the neighboring countries, it created a space where those who are not “normal”, who are not a “normal man” or a “normal woman” can be visible.

It took me some time to realize that calling someone “gay” is an accusation of something, of being something. Someone I know, a friend of a friend, penetrated one of his professors, at his request, for a better grade and to pass the class. Neither one of them was called gay. The penetrator did it to pass a class, and the penetrated did it for sexual gratification. They weren’t accused of anything. Everyone knows what happened. We all knew. He, the student, didn’t mind people knowing, and the same goes for the professor as well. They all had things to gain and things to lose. They engaged in a same-sex activities, and they moved on. There was no accusation. To be accused of being “gay” is an identity accusation, to say they engaged in same-sex activities is to say they did something, it has nothing to do with who they are. It could raise an ethical and moral issue in other aspects, but nothing sexual. I am always on the lookout for that word and whether or not I would be accused of being one, of being gay. To be gay, is to be not one of “us”, “us” as in Saudis, Muslims, and so on. To be “gay” is to be rude about your

practices, that you have no shame, when you should be ashamed. To be “gay” is to be too comfortable with your same-sex activities, when you should not be too comfortable.

When I say “I am gay” anywhere in the United States, it comes with a lot of assumptions and it instantly becomes who I am. It does not refer to what I do sexually, but it becomes who I am as a person. It becomes an identity/identification label. It tells a story that I haven’t experienced and may never have. With the word “gay” in the West, comes the ideas of liberation, acceptance, struggle and many other things. It comes with the rainbow flag, pride month, parades and the issue of coming out. When I say I am gay, I am Muslim, and I am from Saudi Arabia, all in one sentence I either have to bring up how I struggle with faith and sexuality, or they will. I have to bring up how being gay in Saudi Arabia is like or they will. I become trapped in a victim-like narrative.

Whenever I feel like I have to refer to myself as gay in the United States it seems weird for other how I did not struggle at all because, in my experience, there was not a lot to struggle with. I did not struggle with same-sex activities in Saudi Arabia because they are private, just like different-sex activities. People like myself, we are not walking around telling everyone who we sleep with. Sex is private, and very personal. And that brings up the issue with coming out of the closet. One of the ways I am “not gay” is in how I am not in a closet to begin with. I do not need to be liberated and free to have sex because I already do that. In this time and age, it could not get any easier to find someone to engage in sexual activities with.

Homosexual, along with gay, translate to *Mithliya Jinsya*. They refer to sexual and emotional attraction to someone from the same sex in English and in the West, but

are limited to sexual practices, and sexual desires sometimes for Arabs and Muslims. The desire aspect can be ignored or emphasized sometimes when using homo/homosexual/gay in its English form or translated to *Mithliya Jinsya* depending on the context and where it is used. In the documentary *Preying On Young Boys, Pakistan's Hidden Predators* (2017), the term homo is only used when sexual desire is discussed. The documentary discusses the issue of same-sex practices in Afghanistan where mostly young boys and kids are penetrated by older men in a gender-segregated country and radically conservative society where sexual practices such as same-sex practices are forbidden, but young boys are used for sex because of the absence of women from the public life. In the documentary, all parties involved in activities are not labeled because they are engaging in it by force or out of necessity. The penetrator is preying on kids, and the penetrated, the young boy is doing it out of survival necessity, to make money or to avoid being killed, which happens even if the kid agrees to engage in those activities sometimes. Labels or terms are provoked once, and only once throughout the documentary, and it's when desire is involved. One of the young boys uses the term “homo” to describe an older guy who wanted to be penetrated for sexual pleasure and gratification.

Another term that was translated from an orientalist and a Christian discourse on sexual activities and morality is *Shuthuth Jinsy*, or sexual deviance. Same-sex activities fall into the category of sexual deviance. Those engaging in same-sex practices are *Shatheen*, plural, or *Shath*, singular. I would be considered *Shath*, or *Shath Jinsy*, a sexual deviant. What advocates of gay rights, and religious scholars advocating for tolerance and

accommodation of members of the LGBTQA+ community in Islam try to do is to make the argument that same-sex activities and practices are not deviant. There is nothing in the Quran that would help make an argument for the normal nature of same-sex activities, while there is many verses and incidents in which different-sex activities are emphasized and discussed. And another aspect of this deviance is ignored, which is the cultural aspect of it. When talking about Muslims who live in the Arab world and the Middle East, same-sex activities are, culturally, deviant. They are not part of the social and cultural norms of the people of that region. Which could help in reclaiming the term *shath*, if necessary, to be used to do what Westerners did with the term “queer” when they reclaimed and used it positively.

I am not naive or under the impression that same-sex activities are normal among Arabs and Muslims, even when some scholars reference stories of men in different Islamic dynasties engaging in those activities with *Ghulman*, young men or young boys. To use the example of older men having same-sex activities with young boys to justify same-sex practices has always made me uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable for several reasons, but I also think how ridiculous it is that some Muslims use that example to justify something as existing and part of history, but then fight against child brides and older men having sex with little girls. That is not a sexual relationship between two adults that, today, would be considered pedophilia if based on desire, unlike what is happening in countries like Afghanistan or the Arab world where it is for the most part taking advantage of young boys in gender-segregated societies. I do not reject or am bothered with the abnormality of what I do. I do not claim it is normal. I cannot tell for sure it is

normal or abnormal, but where I am and where I come from, culturally and religiously, makes me lean more toward the abnormality of same-sex activities. I do not however hold its abnormality negatively. And that is the issue with modern and recent labels as tools of identification in the West, they are always and constantly in a battle to fight how those “identities” and what they do is abnormal. And Muslim and Arab advocates are using the same defense mechanism. I do not. Although rejecting Westernized “gayness”, I, ironically, celebrate its abnormality.

Growing up, although have never been “accused” of engaging in same-sex practices, I have been called or viewed as a *khanith*, a fag. I wasn’t called or viewed as one for having same-sex intercourse, but for the possibility of someone, another man, another young man, having sex with me. I did not control that. I had no way of controlling it. I didn't even have a say in whether or not I wanted to engage in those activities. It was decided by others that I could engage, whether I liked it or not. It did not translate to the possibility of rape, but it did give others permission to sexually harass me. From grabbing my ass to brushing up against me. I had no control at all, not because I engaged in same-sex activities, because I haven’t at the time and wasn’t even thinking about sex, but because what could be of me. Other boys decided that. That’s one of the dangers of labels, especially when they become used as identifiers. You lose control. Whether you choose the label or not, you do not control how others perceive you or that label, and in societies with gender segregation in schools for instance, things can happen.

A couple of years after I moved to the US for college, when I started to think of needing or having to label myself because it’s what this society expects of me, to be

labelled and identified. Of course for someone who is new to sexuality, or new to experiencing sexuality, gay made the most sense. But then I started to think, well, what kind of gay? I saw this around me. This dilemma of even when you are labelled, you need a subcategory of that category. Back home, I wasn't a certain kind of people engaging in same-sex practices, I was just engaging in it. But here in the United States, it doesn't work like that. Are you a bear? Are you an otter? Do you like Broadway and musicals? Are you masculine? The West has made it easier and easier to stereotype "gays", and I was never exposed to any kind of stereotypes. This doesn't mean in the Arab world we respect each other and never make fun of each other, but the stereotypes we have were geographical and of course, religious. We don't choose to be from this region or part of the country and then develop an identity that goes with it, what it does and what it says. So, using "gay" is not only foreign to me culturally and linguistically, if I chose or decided to use it, I would "other" myself among gay Western men and Muslims and Arabs. I would other myself among Muslims and Arabs by taking on a Western identity, and among gay men by trying to figure what kind of gay I am, and I am not sure I would know how to answer that question. This takes us back to the admirable abnormality of the term queer, because it already suggests you don't fit into a category, and it pushes against "gay" stereotypes to some extent. This fear of self-imposed otherness by "inhabiting the word" queer or gay comes with thinking of how I haven't been gay or queer enough or long enough (Ahmed, 2014).

I started using *Salib* 8 or 9 years ago so that when I talk to men online they would know which role I take in the sexual activity. A *salib* is the penetrated one, which means I

am looking for a *mojab*, a penetrator. I use it the same way I would use bottom here in the United States. And that's the thing with terms like "gay" and how they can't translate well and travel abroad. Gay suggest an identity, it's more than the action. It's not just two men having sex. It's who you are. And I believe *salib* serves the same purpose as *shath*, they describe same-sex activities in the Arab and Muslim world. They are used to identify the activity that is the same-sex activity, it does not identify those who are engaging in it. It's a linguist thing, for me at least. Why would I use "I'm gay" in English among Arabs, or even try to use what scholars and writers assumed its accurate translation? Gay would translate to either *shath* or *mithly*, both, in Arabic refer to the sexual activity. I am not *mithly* or *shath* as a person, but simply as a man who has sex with other men. You could be *salib*, *shath*, or *mithly*, and get or be married to a woman. You could be *salib*, *shath*, or *mithly*, and desire women and only women, but for several reasons, you are having sex with someone from the same sex as yourself.

For the most part, here in the United States, I use queer when I need to "identify" myself. Just like *Shath*, sexual deviant, queer has an abnormal side to it, which I enjoy and believe in. If "queer" Muslims and Arabs need to advocate for their existence, they need to stop thinking of civil rights movements-like advocacy in the Muslim and Arab worlds, and start to think radically of how they exist. They are abnormal to Islamic and Arabic morals and ethics, sexual and otherwise. In Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the Arab world, we need to accept the term *Shath*, or sexual deviant, as a description based on cultural and social norms, as well as mostly agreed on religious reactions.

To be able to use *Shath* as a description of abnormality and only a description of abnormality means people have to abandon its moral and ethical baggage, something that a *Shath* cannot do themselves, and has to be practiced by the “normal” people. It also means that those deemed sexually deviant are not necessarily accepted, but visible and acknowledged, without any physical harm or legal consequences. This type of normalization needs to happen on the state and the government level.

Not only are terms helpful in understanding what kind of normalization can happen, but they also how Muslims understand the dynamics between those engaging in same-sex practices, and how they, as well as society sees them. Those terms can tell others whether or not you are a “man”, or how masculin or feminine you are, which could affect how your gender is brought into question based on which term you use.

Gender/Identity: Masculinity/Femininity as Gender

I became familiar with the Hadith where it's believed Prophet Mohammed condemned those who imitate, behave and/or look like the opposite sex. In all versions of the hadith, the word *La'an*, damnation, is used. *La'an* in Islam was taught to us as to be removed from Allah's mercy. It means your good deeds are no longer accepted. The *La'an* hadith came with a version that condemned those who imitate, behave, and/or look like infidels, which became so popular in the 90's and early 2000's as a reaction to growing Westernization trends of different aspects of our lifestyles. Now, what no one bothered to tell us, or no one bothered to explain to me, is that *La'an*, or damnation here is not a guaranteed rejection of all of my good deeds, and that I will no longer receive Allah's mercy. The reason Prophet Mohammed allegedly used that term is to warn Muslims (Bin Baz, n.d.). What's interesting is at the same time in Saudi Arabia, we were all taught, at school or at home, that Allah's mercy is very inclusive, it includes all of us, and the only thing that Allah does not forgive is to believe in someone else with Him. Even though that was preached all the time as a reminder that Allah is so merciful, I never connected the dots. Damnation for "imitation" is an exaggeration.

I was 8 years old when I discovered my love for fashion design, and fashion in general. I started sketching and it looked like everyone was supportive, which is normal seeing how I wasn't doing anything wrong or bad, or at least that's how I felt. My goal was to study fashion design. When I turned 10 or 11, I told my dad that I wanted to study fashion design at ESMOD. His reaction is one of my earliest memories of what or who a

man is, or should be. He said no. I assumed he was joking. But when I asked him why, he said that he will not have a son working in the fashion industry like that. I then realized it had something to do “gayness” and “homosexuality”, and how, to him, men who are fashion designers are gay, even if they are married to women, there’s something not right about them. I haven’t sketched, or attempted to sketch again ever since him and I had that conversation. More than 10 years later, in December of 2020, we revisited that conversation. I jokingly mentioned how if he would have let me study fashion design I would have been a famous designer. He said, I should have. I told him that back then he didn’t want me to do it, but he insisted that I should have at least kept practicing and sketching as a hobby, not a career, not a job, nothing to present to the world. And again, he went back to his argument and why a man should not become a fashion designer, it’s gay. Growing with that idea, I understood why doing something like fashion design would be “gay”, or not something a “man” would do. It’s not masculine. It’s doing something feminine. It’s doing something a woman would do. And if you do it, even if you, a man, were married to a woman with kids, you’re not masculine enough. That’s what “gay” means in this context. It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re engaging in same-sex activities, but you are feminine based on what you’re doing.

Another way my masculinity was questioned was by looking at the toys I played with growing up. I like Barbie just as I like teenage mutant ninja turtles. I like toys that could have a story. I like to play with toys that I can create a world for. What would I do with a car? And that was something that my father had an issue with although it wasn’t that big of a deal for him. He just noticed how I liked dolls that “usually” girls would

play with. Doing this, unintentionally, I guess I can say I was challenging social and gender norms. Why can't I play with a Barbie doll and superman at the same time? Why couldn't I be passionate about fashion and looking good, as well as making others, in my case women, look good? They weren't things that went well with who I was, a boy, who will soon become a man. Imitating women, or behaving like a woman was not an issue at the time, to me, or to my father, I think. After all, I was young, I was a kid playing and drawing.

Sexual practices are part of our gender roles in Saudi Arabia. Manhood and Womanhood are part of our sex life. Sometimes in Saudi we think of equality and recently attempt to overlook gender in the public life, but there's still a hierarchy in sex. There's still a superior gender in sex, culturally. It might not even be visible or an issue when discussing sexual practices between a man and a woman, unless people are talking about pleasure and orgasm and how sex is not enjoyable by men only, but women as well, but it is very visible and very noticeable in same-sex practices among adults.

Growing, what I saw and heard, when kids are having same-sex intercourse, masculinity, manhood and gender are never an issue. They are kids. Yes, they will grow up to be men, but at the moment, they kids, they are boys. The penetrator has nothing to worry about in both cases, young or old, his masculinity, manhood, and gender are not questioned at all. It's the penetrated that goes through the process of his masculinity and manhood being questioned. When he's young, yes, he is doing something wrong, but he's too young to realize and fully understand the social and religious baggage that comes with what he is doing or being done to him. And it's always thought of as something that

he might outgrow. When he grows up, it's assumed he will get married, to a woman of course, and he will become normal. I have seen that. I have met those who were penetrated as kids and grew up and became "normal men". I have also seen some of them grow up to become the penetrator themselves. So, in this case, it wasn't a desire, at least I don't think it was, but a role. In a society where sex is taboo and at the time, more gender segregation, someone had to take on the penetrated role.

I have seen men who are married with kids, and also enjoying same-sex activities with younger men. I have seen kids who used to penetrate either continue to have sex with other men, usually younger or same age, or, without getting married, move on to having sex with women now that they have "access" to women. So there was both a desire and practice, a role being played, usually the penetrated take on the role, the female role to help fulfill the sexual needs and desire of the penetrator. When they grow up, when I grew up, it became less about playing a role, and more about becoming that role. When the penetrator grows up and continues to do that, his adulthood and the "decisions" he makes changes how society views our practices, and it also changes how the penetrator thinks of us.

As a 26 year old having sex with other men, being the penetrated in those sexual activities, I am voluntarily giving away my status as a man. I am stripped away from my masculinity and manhood, and reduced to something of less significance. I am reduced to doing what a woman usually does with a man. I was created and born to do with women what I am willing to have other men do to me. It's what separates desire from orientation. Sexual orientation, especially if talked about in regard to homosexuality means you are

born like this, it's not a decision. But the way we, in Saudi, think of it is that no one is born "gay", and that to engage in same-sex activities is a decision you make. So, my "decision" to be penetrated, is something I can stop but I choose not to.

This way of thinking of sexual desires as decisions and something gender-based is what makes same-sex practices problematic for a lot of Muslims, and for a society like mine, Saudi Arabia. It assumes that I can stop whenever I want and become "normal", which is not wrong, I can stop wherever I want but that does not necessarily mean my sexual desires will automatically change and become more "masculine" or appropriate to who I am as a man. If I were to stop having sex with other men, it does not mean I will easily switch to having sex with women. And, if some Muslim think of the "decision" argument as an accurate and reasonable one, I did not, however, "decide" to become a woman, because I am not a woman, and that is not something that changes with sexual practices.

As an adult, this gender confusion in sexual practices does not stop with those not engaging in same-sex practices, but it can also be noticed in those engaging in sexual practices. Sometimes the penetrated will be confused and actually believe that since he is doing that, then it must be true, he must be a woman. But it's usually the penetrator that fuels that argument. Almost all the men I had sexual intercourse with in Saudi Arabia wanted me to become a woman. This doesn't necessarily mean having female genitalia, but to be as "feminine" and "woman-like" as possible. This means how masculine I look, whether or not I have body hair, whether or not I have facial hair, and whether or not I dress up in women clothing, especially women's lingerie. I was always too hairy to be

penetrated, because women are not hairy. I was too masculine looking, even though sometimes I am too feminine to other people. I was always asked to wear women's lingerie when having sex. It's all about creating the illusion of having sex with a woman, not a man.

One of the things that many gays in the West have been doing successfully is breaking gender norms. Gay men can wear whatever they want, during sex or not. Gay men can refer to themselves as "she" and "her". Saudi men, and many others in the Arab world, are doing the same, but not as a way of breaking gender norms, but to accommodate them. I am not asked to wear women's lingerie to challenge what society think of men and women, masculinity and femininity, I am asked and wearing that to become a woman, because women are the ones that are penetrated in sex, not men. I get referred to as "she" not to say that gender is a social construct that can be changed, but to say gender is a social construct that one must abide by its rules.

We, in Saudi and other Arab countries, see how gender is viewed in the LGBTQA+ community and don't want it to be the norm. And it shouldn't. Every culture has its own gender norms. But the way some react to it is odd. We see gay men in the West in lingerie and we think of them as immoral because they are not necessarily associating with their gender, but as a preference. So what do we do? We, Saudis and people engaging in same-sex activities, do the same, but with our gender norms, which defeats the purpose of what those gays are doing. I remember we used to watch a Lebanese female impersonator and no one ever questioned his gender, masculinity and manhood. He was an entertainer. What he was doing was comedic and we laughed at his

jokes. It wasn't until the term "drag queer" was used to describe him that some people had a problem with. It came with a Western identity. If he's a drag queen then he is imitating women in the condemned way from hadith, not the comedic, funny way. If he's a drag queen then the word "gay" must come with it. He must be gay, even though he wasn't when he was "impersonating", to us at least.

I am not a woman. I don't think of myself as one, nor do I feel like one. I don't think of my sexual practices as a way of challenging gender norms because desire is not gender-based. I do believe I can stop engaging in same-sex activities, but that doesn't necessarily mean I will have sex with woman, or that I will marry a woman. In my experience, in my story, it's not a phase.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Reality of Normalization

In her HBO documentary, *Public Speaking*, someone asked Fran Lebowitz about gay marriage, she responded that people should keep in mind that not all gays are interested in being part of “the two most confining institutions on the planet, marriage and the military” (2010). This is one way to simplify Michael Warner’s argument and how gays are trying to adopt a heteronormative lifestyle (1999). The case against the marriage institution in homosexual relationships can be easily made in the West, a society where relationships don’t necessarily need to end up in marriage to be legitimate or licit, whether or not the need to “normalize” it by getting married. So, married or not, the relationship is still recognized as a relationship, one way or another.

I remember when I was a kid, before I even realized what sex was, and whether or not you could have sex with someone from the same sex or not, I said I would get married. I will marry someone and she can wear whatever she wants, and do whatever she wants. That was the norm. A relationship is not a relationship without marriage. And to think that I, as if it was up to me, will let her, as if it was not up to her, to do and wear whatever she wants, is evidence of how the culture had an influence on the way I was thinking about “legitimate” relationships. The power dynamic in a relationship, in a marriage. How things are between a man and a woman in a marriage. It was things I saw from those around me, things I heard. It was how everyone at the time thought about marriage and relationships who was my age.

Places like the United States had a longer history of LGBTQA+ activism, they had their Stonewall riots, and many advocates for legalizing LGBTQA+ identities, or normalizing them. Part of the normalization process was marriage. What do normal couples do? They get married. How can gay people become normal? They also get married. It was sought as a right that needed legal and political recognition. Whether or not, as a gay person, you would like to get married, you still support other people's right to do so. The Arab and Muslim world did not have anything similar to Stonewall riots. Recent years have seen more public activism to recognize gay identities, not simply same-sex practices. But the Arab and Muslim world still haven't gone through the whole process of going outside and demanding to have the right to get married, and I don't think we will. I do not seek to get married or think about getting married when engaging in same-sex practices, as I don't really see a purpose of it, but others might. Those who are publicly advocating for "gay rights" are not necessarily seeking for same-sex marriage, but starting with something that would shock the society less, which is decriminalizing. Those attempts can be seen in places like Tunisia and Lebanon, regardless of whether or not they succeeded in their attempts.

In the Arab and Muslim world, those engaging in same-sex practiced may have not demanded and protested for "gay rights" so much, or at all in the case of the gulf region, but I can see where those arguments are coming from. The goal is very similar to that in the West, in the United States, which is to "normalize", to be considered normal, but the justification, of course, is different. Although influenced by Christianity and Catholicism, the political sphere and legal system in the United States is not as religious

as places like Saudi, Kuwait, Tunisia, Egypt, or even Lebanon. It's very interesting when laws are introduced in those countries that help women for instance, and people call it "progressive", because the way it was before those laws were introduced was based on the cultural interpretation of the religion. People are shocked that a country like Saudi would allow women to drive, thinking it was too religious to do so, when in fact it was the cultural norms influenced by religious interpretations that made it so hard for women to drive. Nothing in Islam says women cannot drive. So, people are always in trying Muslim majority countries to justify what they want, what they need, or even who they are through "religious channels", and normalization of same-sex practices and gay rights are no exception. In fact, they face the hardest challenge, the challenge of going against societies that almost unanimously agree on how they feel about same-sex practices and gay rights.

Some scholars chose the road less traveled but more complicated which is to challenge the abnormality of those practices, and the "gay" identity as something more than a sexual desire (Kugle 2010, Jahangir & Abdullatif 2016). The orientation, and the *fitra*, the original disposition, approach to normalizing homosexuality is probably one of the hardest challenges for a scholar to take upon themselves. It's also one of the most dismissed arguments among scholars who disagree with them, and by society. Muslims believe that Allah created humans as males and females and created them to procreate. Procreating, as discussed previously, does not happen naturally in same-sex couples. So it's automatically, for the majority of Muslims, disqualified as part of the human *fitra*.

Others made a similar argument but not directly related to *fitra*. The argument relates to other interpretations of the story of Lut in the Quran and how it condemns same-sex sexual violence, rape and other things, and not necessarily same-sex consensual practices between adults. This argument interrogate the rejection of same-sex practices the same way it views pre-marital sex between a man and a woman (Habib, 2009). I, too, thought of it similarly, when I couldn't understand the condemnation of same-sex practices in Islam. I still don't understand the unanimous consent, but I, based on what and how I read from various religious scriptures, mainly the Quran, disagree with any suggestion that would lead to a same-sex *nikah*, marriage contract, in Islam, but I could be wrong. It is, however, amusing how in a branch of Islam like Shia Islam would condemn "homosexuals" and most same-sex practices but allow what is known as *mutaa*, temporary marriage. This could be a starting point for Shia Muslims advocating for same-sex marriage, but the chances for people like me, Sunni Muslims, to find anything that would suggest anything of the sort is impossible.

All attempts to "normalize" almost in direct contrast to social and cultural norms of a group of people who practice Islam. It's almost impossible not to clash with what is considered normal when discussing same-sex practices and homosexuality. What I can say about homosexuality, or public display and recognition of a Western-developed identity in a country like Saudi Arabia, or the majority of the Muslim and Arab world, is that it will never happen. Social and culturally, it won't be acceptable, and legally, based on the religious-cultural influence it won't do anyone any good. Same-sex practices, on the other hand, can be treated differently. Since those are practiced privately and have

nothing to do with public indecency, they can be decriminalized, rather than fully normalized.

Decriminalization doesn't necessarily mean normalization or approval by the state, and it of course doesn't mean approval by society, but it means that those engaging in those practices are no longer targeted on social media and dating apps. This would stop the state's "witch-hunt" of those engaging in same-sex activities privately and using social media to meet other people who are also seeking to do the same. The number of times I was suspicious of someone I was talking to on Twitter far exceeds the people I trust. They may censor videos and pictures, but the idea that social media is being used to find people who are privately engaging in same-sex practices is what scares me, as well as others, who do not represent a small percentage of Saudi men.

What many Western "gay activists" don't understand is that their so-called efforts to call out and pressure the Saudi government to recognize homosexuality and to accept it as something normal, is that it puts the majority of people in Saudi Arabia engaging in those practices in danger, danger of unwanted exposure and publicity that would lead to them being arrested and punished, as well as bringing shame to themselves and their families in a culture that values dignity.

Human/Gay Rights

Hanna Arendt said that people are not born equal, we become equal (1951). In Islam, we are all equals because we are born equals, and then it depends on the social context, where and when we are born, we may or may not become equal. And although

we are born equals in Islam, and not born equals according to Arendt, in the process of our continued existence after birth or becoming equals, that's when we gain those rights, however you may want to call them.

It's very unsettling to argue that humans have rights simply because they are humans when the same societies, the same states that advocate "human rights" are also the ones going to war for oil, supporting military occupations, and keeping children in detention camps. Human rights are a discourse. They are not applicable. And depending on how and why you want to implement "human rights", they could be a noble idea, they could come from a good place. They could have good intentions. But that does not mean they do not have a sense of superiority that comes with them. One party claims to treat humans better than the other one, so all people must have the same laws and ideas that the first party has. One side is bad, and one side is good, according to the "good" side.

People do not possess rights for simply being human. Rights do not come naturally. Locke argued that people have inalienable natural rights that they are born with, like liberty, life and property, all of course were appropriate for that period of time. But did everyone have them? No. Rights are not natural because they cannot be observed like how one would observe a natural attribute of a human being such as body movement or possess them the same way we would possess an object (Churchill, 2006). They possess rights, human and/or natural, by being attached and part of a political body, like a state. They have rights based on their citizenship. They have citizenship rights. They are not guaranteed dignity and protection based on that, but at least they are closer to it. Human rights, on the other hand, cease to exist when human are not attached to a political body.

Stateless people, undocumented, and even documented immigrants, refugees, and so on are some of the examples of how you lose your human rights the second you lose your citizenship rights, the second you are not recognized by something or someone as part of a group, or something similar.

With that being said, part of the human rights discourse is gay rights. And just like you don't necessary earn any rights by being a human being, you, unfortunately, don't have them by being gay. A higher power, and in this context, sadly it's not a deity, although assumption and interpretations of what is believed to be the rules and teachings of that deity, must decide if you have rights. The state in which you are a citizen, if you are a recognized citizen will be the one to decide if you have rights unique to your situation or not.

Most gay rights activist would argue that members around the globe have the rights to live however they want without fear of persecution, to be with whoever they want, to get married, to adopt and to have a family like everyone else. Those rights may apply to people in the West, and they should have the right to do so if they ever seek to get married and to have a family, but are those living conditions transnational? The human rights discourse would allow us to say they are. This would mean that gay rights, which are "human rights" are universal. Jack Donnelly argues that, "Human rights... are ordinarily understood to be the rights that one has simply because one is human. As such, they are equal rights, because people either are or are not human beings. Human rights are also inalienable rights, because being or not being human usually is seen as an inalienable fact of nature, not something that is either earned or can be lost. Human rights

are thus 'universal' rights in the sense that they are held universally by all human beings” (2007, p. 3). Some aspect of the human rights discourse, in theory, could be universal, but because they include things that are very specific to some societies, like gay rights in the West, and attempt to universalize them, when it comes to practice “human rights” in real life, they become problematic to so many people because what those rights mean are irrelevant to them being humans, and ignore their social, cultural and religious norms and traditions which influence and attribute to the state’s constitution and legal system.

One can take the concept of universalizing human rights and see how effective it is on a somewhat smaller scale. The West tries to universalize human rights but it’s been forgotten that within those societies they aren’t working. To see how effective the universalization of human rights is, the United States could be considered the globe and its ethnic and racial groups as the different cultures and states. The United States is unable to change how different ethnic and racial groups view certain “human rights” aspects because they don’t compel with their beliefs and practices, and those are people who live in that space and place where the foundation of what became the human rights discourse was developed, and they experience Westernization more than everyone else and on a daily and much more intense basis, but they, not all of course, still don’t subscribe to the idea of universal human rights, whether they realize it or not, intentional or not. So, when one goes back to the larger scale, where a country like the United States is only one country, expect to universalize its ideas, beliefs and practices?

I never thought of myself as lacking rights because of who I have sex with, because to me, sexual practices are done privately, they are not part of the public sphere,

and they do not require recognition or protection, publicly. They don't need to be brought up to the public. It is how we, as Arabs and Muslims, think of sex. It's private. It's done privately, and although some people would be fascinated with beaches in Europe where you can be naked and/or have sex publicly, they would never participate. When we enjoy the publicity of anything relating to sex, we enjoy it as observers and bystanders. That's why our "rights" don't need protection in that sense. There are no rights when it comes to having sex, for most of us. We are aware, or we are taught, some of us of course, on sexual ethics from a religious perspective, and those are explained in regard to marital sex. What the husband and wife can and cannot do. What they should and should not do. As for same-sex practices, since they are sinful, they have no ethics as they are unethical, and not discussed, and are always kept private. Someone engaging in same-sex activities has a very limited social circle where he can discuss them, and it's usually among those who also engage in them, or anonymously online.

It should be noted that the privacy aspect here is similar to Western liberal idea of "right to privacy" and it does not eliminate all efforts for public recognition. Public recognition in a place like Saudi Arabia where acts of intimacy, although celebrated and enjoyed on social media, they might not have the same reaction in real life. Public indecency laws are not limited to same-sex relationships or acts of intimacy, but also include those shown by different-sex relationships. Ideally, people wouldn't be forced to privacy, but are given the option to either go public or keep it private. Because there is no attempts to do so by activists and those engaging in same-sex practices, at least nothing

that I am aware of, it's really hard to tell what and how publicity would like in Saudi Arabia.

All these rights, and even Western advocates of gay rights mostly focus on “gay” men and women. Transgender people are almost forgotten, or ignored, which is ironic because out of all the categories of the LGBTQA+ community, transgender people would be the only ones they have in common with Islam. After several evaluations, and it's a long process, someone can become a trans man or a transwoman, and even though they went through the process of “changing” their gender according to religious and medical accommodations, they are still rejected by society. Some people still view them as not fully men or fully women, as crossdressing, even though they went through all the religious and medical channels, which are all part of the state. But because their visibility does not challenge social and cultural gender norms, the human rights discourse and those advocating it almost never talk about those who are trans. Because once you go through the sex reassignment surgery, your existence is no longer part of the public display required by the West, you become another man, or another woman, until you engage in same-sex activities, and then you are recognized as worthy of their attention.

Cultural Relativism

Muslim societies, especially those like Saudi Arabia have, what Jack Donnelly describes as a “strong cultural relativism” (1989). In Saudi Arabia, where we have strong cultural relativism, culture is the “principal source of the validity of a moral right or rule” (p. 401). While universalism thinks of moral values as applicable to all in the same way,

relativism provides a counterargument where there are no universal standards for morals, ethics and rights (Chimakonam & Agada, 2020). Cultural relativism, when used in the human and gay rights discourse, can show us how culture, how those Western standards are not necessarily universal, and could not, or should not be applied to people engaging in same-sex practices in cultures and societies that do not have “gays”. Cultures are created. Their practices, beliefs and norms differ from other cultures, cultures do not “possess” people (Dhamoon, 2010). People cannot take one culture and impose it on members of another culture.

Some arguments against universalism argue that the human rights discourse focuses only on the right of the individual, and ignores the rights of the community the individual belongs to, the common good (Churchill, 2006). For a country like Saudi Arabia, and for the majority of Saudis, and from a cultural relativism perspective, it is for the common good, looking at the ethics and norms of the society, not to enact any laws that would give “gays” the right to be in a same-sex marriage, not to show the rainbow flag publicly, and not to break any public indecency laws. That does not mean they have the right to govern what people do privately, but they can govern the public sphere, and based on the social norms and values, they can choose to allow for certain things to happen publicly, and deny others.

Publicity vs. Visibility

Public display of any kind of romantic intimacy, between a man and a woman, two men, or two women is not part of the culture. The West is used to couples kissing and

hugging in public, in Saudi Arabia we simply don't have that. We don't have "couples", we have a husband and wife. Dating is done privately. So, when gay rights are invoked, it's not a matter of visibility, it's a matter of publicity. To go back to cultural relativism, different-sex "couples" are never pressured to be visible in Muslim-majority countries. Not only is there no way for me to walk by a man and a woman and know for sure if they're married, the legitimacy of their relationship is almost never questioned in public because there's the assumption that they are, or it's simply not my business. They are not kissing, they are not intimate, and they might not even hold hands.

People who engage in same-sex practices are visible, Muslims know they exist, they are aware of what those engaging in same-sex practices do, but it's done privately. But it's the lack of "gay couple" display of intimacy and emotions that the gay rights discourse wants to see. But if the culture does not even have those kinds of displays between a man and a woman, how, or why would one expect two men to do that? I would never kiss anyone in public. It makes me uncomfortable. I was brought up in a society where things like that happen privately.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusions and Implications

Limitations

This thesis tells one story, and although it sounds similar to other stories, and might feel familiar to some, it still only tells one story, the writer's. As I have not experienced anything life threatening, have not had any legal trouble or family issues because of my practices, they cannot tell the reader what engaging in same-sex activities in Saudi Arabia is like, it only gives an idea and a glimpse into a somewhat privileged experience. As this thesis focuses mostly on the physical practices, the emotional aspects remain to be absent from the discussion and conversations people, scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims are having when discussing same-sex practices or gayness, since there isn't anything in the scripture or tradition that would assume that emotions are controlled in any capacity, unlike the physical practice where the majority of scholars argue that those who engage in same-sex practices can stop those sinful practices.

Another limitation this thesis has met is the lack of linguistic analysis of translated terms from Western societies that are used to describe those engaged in same-sex activities. What the West uses as terms of identity labeling, Muslims and Arabs are only using to describe the activity, so it does not make sense to use a term with its social and cultural baggage and apply it in a different context on a different group of people.

The last limitation is the lack of research done on gender identity and sexual practices. Western gays and homosexuals, and Western societies, for the most part and whether they agree with the practice or not, understand the difference between a man having sexual intercourse with other men, and a transwoman or someone who is suffering from gender dysphoria having sexual intercourse with men. Because Arab and Muslim societies nowadays have their own gender roles in sexual relationships, a man who is penetrated is thought of as a woman sometimes. This becomes very visible when looking at those engaging in same-sex activities, not gays or homosexuals, and how they try to bring gender roles from a different-sex relationship to their practices, “reducing” the penetrated to a woman-like status, which is why the feminization of penetrated men is very noticeable, and allows the penetrator to maintain his “normal” manhood or masculinity.

Conclusion

“Religion is threatening, inspiring, consoling, provocative, a matter of reassuring routine or calls to put one’s life on the line. It is a way to make peace and a reason to make war. As the great Iranian sociologist and Islamic reformer Ali Sharyati put it: Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people's lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt.”

- **Craig Calhoun, 2011**

Expectations are very important to have, but they are more difficult to be expressed, and of course, fulfilled. As I made it very clear previous chapters, I do not expect a society like Saudi Arabia to normalize same-sex activities, or to think of those engaging in them as normal people. I do however expect Muslims, in and outside of Saudi, to not play Allah and determine how and when those engaged in same-sex activities should be punished. That is why decriminalization is highly vital, very essential to Muslim majority countries more than non-Muslim, countries even. There’s individualism and there’s social responsibility, both are necessary in Muslim societies and to be experienced by Muslims. Individualism because it’s very clear from the beginning that no one can force you to do or not to do anything, and when Allah said to Prophet Mohammed that he, Mohammed, was only sent to remind people of what is right and wrong, not to control them in any kind of way, makes it clear that the level of individualism that could, and should be entertained by Muslims is high. It also confuses

Muslim of what kind of social responsibility is expected of them. Saying the people are free to do what they want, privately, without hurting anyone, does not mean they are no longer part of the community of society, or unworthy of mercy and protection.

Judith Butler argues that, “if I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are ‘human’ in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, but never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feelings and even feel myself to be ethical” (2015). We as Muslims have this ability to selectively care for others. Unfortunately, those engaging in same-sex activities are excluded. You do not have to agree with someone to not want them to be hurt or endangered. Butler’s argument sounds very familiar to me, because it speaks to me, religiously, to what I was taught growing up. Decriminalizing those practices and activities can lead to more tolerance to what happens between consenting adults privately, where they won’t be dealing with a vicious witch-hunt in a society that seeks *sitr*, to not expose the identity of someone who did something bad or what they did so that they don’t have to deal with any social consequences.

To decriminalize same-sex practices, the terminology used to describing those engaging in same-sex activities must be revisited and analyzed. They must be relieved from their ethical and moral assumptions. To be *shath*, deviant or abnormal, should be only used to describe something that is abnormal to the society, foreign to it, not in terms

of ethics or morals. Of course, religiously, it could still be viewed and considered as a sin, but as long as it's done privately, it should not have any legal consequences based on *fiqh*, jurisprudence.

Finally, gender cannot be viewed as something changing with social and cultural gender roles, including sexual roles. A lot of people think of same-sex activities as something abnormal because a man is taking on a woman's role in sex. This leads to speculations of whether he really is a man or not. Being a "man" has its cultural expectations of course, and ways to define manhood and masculinity, all are stripped away from the penetrated, not the penetrator, in any same-sex practices. We in Saudi understand femininity as something gender-specific, something only a woman can be. So, if a man is feminine, he's not really a man, and might lead to gender dysphoria speculations.

I set out to address how mainstream Islam and Muslim societies, focusing on Saudi Arabia, treats same-sex activities compared to what I believe the Quran and hadith are saying, the role of the Westernization labeling them "gay" or "homosexual" in how Muslims and Arabs think of those activities and practices and those engaging in them, as well as the effect of thinking of the penetrated as a woman on the penetrated himself and how society views him, but I am left with more questions. If we are to think of same-sex practices as sinful, regardless of the different interpretations of the story of Lut, what about emotions? Is same-sex emotional attraction forbidden as well? We think of desire as something completely physical, and it is for a lot of Saudis engaging in same-sex activities, but what about those emotionally attracted to other men? Another question is

where the terms *salib* and *mojab*, that refer to the penetrated and penetrator come from, and why was the penetrated referred to as *salib*, negative, while the penetrator is a *mojab*, positive? Does that have anything to do with how negatively and positively Arabs think of the penetrated and the penetrator? The last question is how and when did the concept of sin in Muslim societies become so everlasting, and why are same-sex activities thought of as something so horribly? In Islam, Allah forgives everything but to be worshiped with something or someone else, so why are same-sex activities or “what people of Lut did” are viewed as something similar to worshipping something or something else, unforgivable, when it is forgivable, like all other sins?

I cannot answer those questions based on my own experience, as I have never experienced emotional attraction, yet, unaware of when I started using the term *salib* to refer to my sexual preferences or had anyone describe it to me or why it was used, nor do I think of same-sex activities as unforgivable or make me unworthy of Allah’s mercy and forgiveness. I do however know and make sure to verbalize that knowledge that I have the right to freely do what I want without hurting anyone and without earthly punishment based on what is considered a sin or not, right or wrong, good or bad. I also expect, as does everyone else, support from society and protection, and maybe even protection from some members of the same society. Whether or not I am in fact sinful, I need to have what Judith Butler describes as a “grievable life” (2015), because if I lack support, then my life is not worthy of protection, so not “grievable”. Every life, every soul, especially to us Muslims, sinful or not, is grievable, unconditionally.

Not only am I grievable, but I occupy many spaces and all of those spaces create a sense of in betweenness for Muslims like me. This sense of in betweenness where one think of themselves as part of more than one thing, more than one culture, more than one group, agreeing and disagreeing with all of them at the same time is because people like myself are treated as outsiders on both sides, and because, in my case, of my upbringing and religious beliefs. It sounds sometime that I may be “homophobic” and other times as a supporter of “gay rights”, it sounds at times like I am conservative in its commonly used meaning, and at times liberal or even secular. The truth is, I could be all. I behave and believe differently, as aa lot of Muslims, and non Muslims do, and I might do what I don’t think I should do, again, as most Muslims and non Muslims do. The Muslim experience, and the “queer” experience might be thought of as separate and opposite experiences, but they can be experienced by the same person at the same time, without making any sense to the observer who thinks they know what’s best for me, or making sense to me also. I am lost between my sexual practices and desires and what my religious thinking and religious beliefs tell me to do, which are all inconsistent. Given all these tensions and contradictions, however, I have never stopped being a Muslim.

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