

The Politics of LGBT Muslim Identities

Written by Momin Rahman

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MOMIN RAHMAN, APR 2 2015

LGBT Muslims in Muslim Majority Cultures

In this short article, I aim at giving an overview of the current research on LGBT Muslim identities and argue that this research illustrates some key issues for international relations (IR) in terms of the understanding of globalizing LGBT identities and citizenship.

Habib's (2010) collection contains evidence on the experiences of those who identify as homosexual within some contemporary Muslim cultures (Malaysia, Pakistan, Iraq, Singaporean Malay Muslims). This evidence illustrates that there is a contemporary discourse of cultural opposition between sexual diversity and Islam, identifying the former with the west. However, this research and other work also demonstrates that western conceptualizations of LGBT identities are an important resource for local and national developments of queer identities (Mahdavi, 2012) but they are not necessarily a blueprint for how sexual diversity will develop in non-western cultures. I have theorized this contemporary condition of LGBT Muslim identities (Rahman, 2010, 2014) arguing that queer Muslims draw upon a range of western and eastern identity resources in negotiating their sexualities and thus testify to the *intersection* of apparently exclusive cultures. For example, Blackwood's (2005) research on lesbians in Indonesia shows that they incorporate western discourses into local and national ones to make sense of their identities and create communities, and Boellstorff's (2005) anthropological studies on gay men in Indonesia supports this framing of transnational sexuality formation, although he emphasizes that to be publicly gay for men remains difficult in this Muslim culture. Recent research on same-sex behaviour amongst men in Turkey also suggests that western versions of gay identity are becoming more common, although they remain a minority and indeed co-exist with the more common gender variant understanding of homosexual behaviour in Turkish culture (Bereket and Adam, 2008).

These brief and limited examples continue the suggestion from historical studies of Muslim homoeroticism that we must recognize a different ontological construction from the west when we think about LGBT identities in Muslim cultures (Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008; Murray and Roscoe, 1997). For example, a recent account of lesbian life in Pakistan illustrates the differences of living a lesbian identity in a culture where there is no vocabulary for such identities, while also acknowledging that modernizing influences are gradually shifting the possibilities of traditional gender-segregated culture, where homo-eroticism flourished, towards a more modern western binary world of sexual identities (Gandhi, 2012). Moreover, Hossain's (2012) research on *hijra* Muslims in Bangladesh illustrates how they do not conform to dominant understandings of identity of Muslim, male, or homosexual. Contemporary Muslim same-sex eroticism is therefore not exclusively eastern or, indeed, consistent across Muslim cultures, but rather the ontology of contemporary homosexual identities are being formed in intersection with the increasingly globalized discourse of western LGBT political identity.

Contemporary Lived Experience of Queer Muslims in the West

Research on LGBT Muslims living in the west is similarly limited in quantity. What evidence there is illuminates four key issues: the perception of negative reactions from familial ethnic communities to declaring a public homosexual identity; the related perception of public homosexual identity as 'western'; individual re-interpretations of Islamic texts to accommodate homosexuality; and the absence of any visible community.

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One of the first studies was focused on 6 activists from *Al-Fatiha*, which is a support group network found in some major cities in the USA. This study identified important themes for LGBT Muslims: religion; east-west cultural comparisons including gay identity, marriage expectations, coming out; 'color' dynamics (a term used to discuss ethnicity in the USA) (Minwalla et al., 2005). The cultural opposition identified here is repeated in other studies, and structures the key process of 'coming out'. For example, American-Iranian Khalida Saed discusses her mother's reaction when she came out: "The most compelling argument she came up with was that I was far too Americanized and that my sexuality was an offspring of the American values I had internalized. This last argument may or may not have a ring of truth to it. I'm not sure I would have had the balls to discuss my sexuality at all, or even consider it, if my American side hadn't told me I had the right." (Saed, 2005: 86). This theme of the perceived 'westernness' of a homosexual identity is mirrored in other research, including autobiographical work (Khayatt, 2002; Khan, 1997; Rahman, 2008) and other research on lesbians in the USA (Al-Sayyad, 2010); gay men in Australia (Abraham, 2009); and both lesbians and gay men in the UK (Siraj, 2006, 2009; Jaspal and Siraj, 2011; Yip, 2004, 2005).

Despite the heteronormativity in Muslim communities (Abraham, 2010) it seems that many queer Muslims do not reject their ethnic or kinship networks outright, partly because of the need to remain close to an ethnic community in the face of wider racism (Abraham, 2010, Minwalla et al., 2005) and, more specifically, the increasing western cultural exclusions of Muslims (Mepschen et al., 2010; Rahman, 2014). This racism and cultural opposition also appears *within* LGBT communities and politics, which remain mostly white, comprising what Abraham (2010) describes as "Hegemonic Queer Islamophobia", also evidenced in McKeown et al.'s (2010) study of British South Asian gay men.

Another important theme that emerges from this research is the attempt to develop a specific Muslim and sometimes Islamic queer identity, largely drawing on individual strategies to re-interpret religious texts. This is evident in the research done by Yip (2004, 2005) in the UK, with a consistent theme on 'queering religious texts'. Moreover, this theme speaks to the absence of queer Muslim community, leading individuals to attempt re-interpretive strategies in their own way and within whatever limited Muslim LGBT networks they can find. However, the existence of some support groups in larger cities is important and regularly mentioned in this research; these include groups such as *Al-Fatiha*, which is web based but has some local organizers across North America; *Salaam*, based in Toronto, and the *Safra, Naz*, and *Imaan* projects in the UK.

Key Issues for Further Research

This is, of course, a controversial area of study because of the discourse of incompatibility between Muslim cultures and LGBT identities that structures contemporary political debates on both sides. However, the research cited above testifies to the ways in which queer Muslims fundamentally challenge the oppositional discourse of Islam and sexual diversity, precisely because their identities and experiences are located at the intersection of these apparently exclusive cultures. They are properly understood as theoretically 'queer intersectional identities' (Rahman, 2010) because they represent 'impossible' or 'unviable' subjects (Abraham, 2009) whose very existence disrupts the ontological coherence of the dominant identity narratives of both 'queer' and 'Muslim' and their oppositional, civilizational positioning (Rahman, 2014). When referring to 'queer intersectional identities' I draw upon the emphasis in intersectionality theory on standpoint epistemology that requires attention to the experiences of those located at significant intersections because these experiences contest dominant ways of understanding (Rahman, 2009).

The review presented above makes clear that evidence on Muslim same-sex sexualities is fairly limited and hence there is a need for more research on this subject and particularly on the lived experiences of same-sex Muslim sexualities. There is a range of recent research on migration (Peumans, 2014), including refugee and asylum migrants (Kahn, 2015), that encompasses some evidence on queer Muslims, but again, this is fairly limited and does not focus specifically on the lived experiences of queer Muslims. There is, therefore, a pressing need for more research in a greater variety of western and non-western settings which will reform our dominant ways of understanding the significance and formation of sexual identities. This, in turn, will contribute to the current debates about whether the internationalization of LGBT rights is based on western understandings of sexuality, which do not mirror the experiences of homoeroticism either cross-culturally or within the west itself in minority communities.

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Moreover, a crucial component of queer Muslim standpoint is that their experiences are structured by the contemporary political discourses that increasingly position LGBT rights and identities as the exemplar of western modernity, and thus Muslim homophobia as the exemplar of Muslim otherness to this modernity. Much contemporary research is focused more directly on this current manifestation of orientalism that draws sexual diversity politics into Islamophobia. Puar's (2007) conceptualization of the emergence of a western 'homonationalism' to stigmatize non-western populations, and Massad's (2008) critique of the 'gay international' have been hugely influential in the body of work that engages in this more cultural level of analysis. I argue, however, that there needs to be a more explicit acknowledgement that Muslim homophobia is also part of this orientalism, characterizing LGBT politics, Muslim homophobia and western modernity as triangulated process of *homocolonialism* that uses queer politics to validate the exceptionalism of western modernity as a social formation (Rahman, 2014). Both Muslim postcolonial or religious resistance, and western universalist queer politics compound this assumption that there is only one possible form of sexual diversity which has already been achieved in the west. This political analysis of the significance of homosexuality is fundamentally important to understanding how LGBT politics is caught up in the process of 'othering' Muslim nations and Muslim immigrant populations and thus how queer politics is increasingly resisted as part of a postcolonial opposition to western impositions of homosexualization. This postcolonial framing of resistance creates a difficult political climate for criticizing Muslim homophobia (Mepschen et al., 2010) but I have argued that we must understand this homophobia as structured through Islamophobia and the triangulation of queer rights therein (Rahman, 2014). Research on queer Muslim standpoint disrupts this homocolonialist triangulation by forcing us to consider how to dislodge the contemporary internationalization of queer rights from this triangulated homocolonialist framework.

On the other side of homocolonialism lies the significance of homosexuality in Muslim traditions. There is a vast body of research that demonstrates that Muslim homo-erotics have been rendered invisible through both colonialism and postcolonial reformations of the sexual and gendered order (Abdulahadi, 2010; Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008; Murray and Roscoe, 1997). Not only does this permit the deployment of an invented tradition of Muslim homophobia as part of the triangulation of homocolonialism, but the lack of knowledge about Muslim homoerotic traditions limits the resources available to LGBT Muslims to negotiate their sexualities, both as individuals and within the contexts of families and communities. This is an issue of both cultural and religious heritage. Al Haqq Kugle's work, *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010), represents a thorough religious discussion in which he acknowledges that confronting sexual diversity for Muslim communities is a difficult task, largely because of the religious framework that condemns homosexuality through scripture. He nonetheless argues that it is a necessary task for LGBT identified Muslims, and this is supported by the variety of research cited above that demonstrates the importance of such reformulations to individual homosexual identity.

The specifically religious issue of reinterpreting Islamic prohibitions speaks to a wider cultural issue of whether Muslim traditions are able to become more 'progressive' in a range of ways that embrace gender equity and sexual diversity. This in itself is a contentious issue, because calls for 'reformation' in Islam are often seen to be calls for 'modernization' based on western experience (Safi, 2003). Safi (2003) frames this issue more positively for Muslim autonomy as an issue of recovering plural traditions within Muslim political and social thought. Confronting the issue of Muslim same-sex sexualities can potentially both contribute to and benefit from an expansion of Muslim political thought. It is in this embodiment of pluralism that the issue of Muslim same-sex sexualities also connects to Muslim feminism, which has a much stronger presence in Muslim political consciousness because there is a more established tradition of Muslim feminist thought and an increasing number of political and civil groups that focus on gender equality. Since the regulation of sexual and gender diversity is universally related to the maintenance of gender normativity – however culturally differentiated that normativity may be – the question of pluralism of gender identities and status, specifically for women, will fundamentally underpin any changes that may come in the significance and regulation of Muslim homosexualities.

Research on queer Muslims forces us to recognise that the contemporary expansion of LGBT citizenship in western countries and internationally has become linked with an anti-Muslim political agenda in Islamophobia and, on the other side, a Muslim resistance to Islamophobia that reifies a cultural traditionalism that ignores same-sex homoeroticism in Muslim cultures. Issues of queer Muslim citizenship, politics and identity are, therefore, not only important in their own right, but they illustrate the contemporary socio-political intersectional nature of LGBT politics

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more generally. As many of us attempt to put sexuality onto the agenda for mainstream IR (Weber, 2014), we have to be aware that the complications of cross-cultural differences, contemporary intersectional formations, and the increasing use of sexuality within a global politics of homophobia (Weiss and Bosia, 2013) and western civilizational superiority, inevitably demands a fundamental reformulation of IR's mainstream positivist epistemology and Eurocentric world-view of social formation.

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