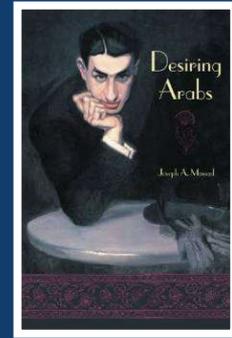
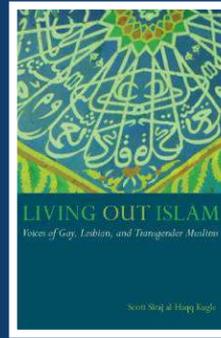


# Book Reviews

Rachel Pollard



## Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims:

Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, 2014, New York University Press, p265, £16.99, 9781 4798 9467 3.

## Desiring Arabs:

Joseph A Massad, 2007, Chicago University Press, p453 \$22.50 9780226509594

Some readers may have read in the Guardian (25th March) about the tragic death of Nazeem Mahmood. He killed himself apparently because his Muslim family would not accept his sexuality or his relationship with Mat, his non-Muslim partner of 13 years. A devastated Mat said to the Guardian interviewer 'I blame a community that is so closed minded to allow these bigoted views that make families believe that their honour is more important than loving their children. The respect and honour of the family is more important than the happiness of the children they gave birth to. How sick is that?' Mat has set up a charity to educate and raise awareness about the homophobia that blights the lives of LGBTQI people in some religious communities, Christian and Jewish as well as Muslim ([nazandmatfoundation.org](http://nazandmatfoundation.org)).

Mat's unequivocal condemnation of the Nazeem's family is entirely understandable, however, I think to deepen our understanding of this cruel homophobia we need to see it in the wider historical and political context of the relationship between the West and the Arab and Muslim East. These two books address the issue of homosexuality and Islam from two different perspectives: Scott Kugle focuses on the lives of lesbian, gay and transgender Muslims as seen through the lens of a Western human rights agenda whilst Joseph Massad focuses on the damaging impact of colonial and neo-imperialist discourses on Arab and Muslim societies. Both are deeply concerned with the rights of sexual minorities.

Some discourses cut through complexity by making sweeping generalisations, particularly when it comes to the experience of other

people. As William Blake said 'to generalise is to be an idiot' and perhaps idiocy is sometimes a defence against the fear and extent of the unknown, the otherness of the other. And at times, our own assumptions about other people based on generalising our own experience to theirs can lead to us trying to help them in ways that are misguided and cause harm.

I imagine that there are few people entirely immune from being the object of other people's generalisations and feeling how dehumanising and painful that can be. A particularly pernicious generalisation is that as gay and lesbian partnerships now have the same legal status as heterosexual partnerships, that the LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) 'community' all enjoy the freedoms and respect that are apparently enjoyed by the very few members of the political, social and cultural elite that have come out as lesbian or gay in recent years. Nazeem and Mat's experience is an example of how little impact legislation can have on social attitudes. The net effect of political and economic developments over recent years for LGBTQI people is questionable for those who are not relatively cushioned



by wealth and social power and/or belong to religious faiths that are intolerant of sexual diversity.

Of course, the experience of people both within each LGBTQI group and in different groups is infinitely varied according to the exigencies of each individual life, as it is for everyone. Scott Kugle's interviews with lesbian gay and transgender Muslims living in secular western 'democracies' is a valuable contribution to increased understanding of this diversity of experience whilst not diminishing the impact of overarching discourses of power on individual subjectivity. Kugle seeks to illustrate both the different ways each of the people he interviews have experienced the conflict between their sexuality and their religious beliefs and the varied ways they have found to assert their identities and resist oppression in their families, communities and the wider society. This book follows an earlier book, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* in which he examines the theological basis for the acceptance of non-heterosexual relations and identities in the Qur'an and hadith<sup>1</sup>.

The position of lesbians and gay men in Muslim communities in the West as well those living in Arab countries and the Indian sub continent is further complicated by the entanglement of agendas promoting human rights with the politics of neo-imperialism. Kugle's view that the rights of LGBTQI people everywhere are quite

simply universal human rights, which transcend the boundaries of religion, culture, nationality and class is vehemently contested by Joseph Massad, a Palestinian Christian, and disciple of the late Edward Said. Massad situates Western constructions of sexuality in Muslim and Arab societies in the tradition of Orientalism<sup>2</sup>, the prevailing European and American discourses about Middle East societies as being backward and in need of 'civilisation' so justifying wars and other forms of colonial and neo-colonial intervention from Napoleon to the present day. Historically, Orientalist discourses about Arab culture portrayed a society that was sexually exotic, open and liberated in contrast to the sexually repressed West. As the West began to talk about this 'repression' a new discourse emerged in which the West began to see itself as the standard bearer of sexual liberation and the Arab and Muslim world as repressed and in need of liberation through education in human rights. The attempts of Western interventions to impose an agenda of sexual rights both for women and sexual minorities in Arab countries has, Massad argues, provoked an Islamic backlash in which the position of women and sexual minorities has deteriorated. The turning point was the 1967 Arab/Israeli war, after which a more sexually tolerant Arab nationalism declined to be replaced by the resurgence of a more assertive and sexually repressive Islamic discourse; itself a response to increasing Western interference in the politics, economics and culture of the Arab and Muslim East.

Massad argues that European and American lead initiatives to promote gay rights throughout the world and their supporters in organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are part of the neo-imperialist project to impose 'superior' western values on Arab and Muslim societies and to dominate them not only politically but culturally. He denounces much of the research on which these organisations which he terms the 'Gay International' base their 'missionary agenda' as a misunderstanding of Arab and Muslim culture and sexual practices and, where Muslims or Arabs are interviewed, they are part of the English speaking and, often foreign educated, minority and unrepresentative of the majority.

Massad writes that same sex relations between men is common and unremarkable in Arab societies but the men who practice it do not construct themselves as homosexual or gay and see no need for a politics to represent them. There is no association of particular sexual practices with an identity or a lifestyle. He sees the attempt to impose the binary categories of heterosexual and homosexual on cultures where no such subjectivities exist as a universalisation of western subjectivities, a battle for discourse, that is not merely misguided, but dangerous, not least to those who practice same sex relationships.

<sup>1</sup> The sayings of the Prophet Mohammed

<sup>2</sup> Orientalism, Said, Edward, W. (1978) New York, Vintage

*...this discourse assumes prediscursively that homosexuals, gays and lesbians are a universal category that exists everywhere in the world and, based on this prediscursive axiom, the Gay International sets itself the mission of defending them by demanding that their rights as 'homosexuals' be granted where they are denied and be respected where they are violated. In doing so the Gay International ... is producing an effect that is far from liberatory. (p 163)*

Massad argues that the net affect of these interventions to promote 'gay rights' has been a backlash from conservative elements and religious authorities in the Arab world and an upsurge of persecution

where none before existed. The 'Gay International' and the Islamic authorities both agree that practitioners of gay sex must be identified but whereas the 'Gay International' said: they should be endowed with human rights and accorded the protection of the state the Islamists demand that they be repressed and subjected to the punishment of the state...(p 265 ). He is also highly critical of Muslim and Arab gay activists who, in his view, have bought into Western constructions of subjectivity and thus are complicit in the 'violence' such discourses unleash. It is upper and middle class Westernized men who seek publicity for their newly acquired sexual identities ...while the poorer members of society who do not possess the choice of exit who bear the brunt of the state's repression that was precipitated to begin with by those who possess social and class power (p 370)

Massad asserts that the 'Gay International's' failure to recognise the non- binary nature of sexual practices in non -Western societies has created a 'straight' world rather than a 'queer' one.

Massad's account is persuasive and extensively researched. However he says much less about same sex relations between women and as Frances Hasso (2011) observes Massad does not acknowledge the possibility of indigenous 'queer' non normative plural sexual subjectivities that may or may not rely on bounded sexual object choice and that may or may not include visibility and identity components<sup>3</sup>.

Scott Kugle, as a white gay American convert to Islam, would appear to be a member of the 'Gay International' that Massad castigates. His book is a response to Massad whom he accuses of misapplying Foucault's ideas to create a false binary opposition between east and west based on an over determined view of subjectivities being entirely a product of power relations. Instead Kugle draws on the work of Saba Mahmood<sup>4</sup> who highlights Foucault's writings on the ethical agency of the self and varied ways of responding to moral codes rather than simply complying or resisting. Kugle writes that his aim is to restore humanity to Muslim lesbian, gay and transgender activists who he sees as being silenced both by Islamic authorities and intellectuals like Massad. Another critic of Massad is Brian Whitaker. He argues that rather than Western cultural influence in the Arab world being a conspiracy, it is the result of increased contact through travel, satellite television and the internet and that while younger people, in particular, may adopt and enjoy certain aspects of Western culture, they usually remain highly critical of Western policies in the region. Whitaker (2011)<sup>5</sup> cites Hussein Ibish who argues that all contemporary identities are a product of modernity and as such inescapable rather than an 'a la carte' menu it is possible to choose from. In response to Massad's assertion that Western attempts to promote 'gay rights' have led to an Islamic backlash and are therefore

3 Hasso, F.S. (2011) Journal of the History of Sexuality, 20 (3) 652-656

4 Mahmood, Saba. (2005), The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press

5 Whitaker, B. (2011) Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East: New Edition, London, Saqi



counterproductive he points out that when Jordan ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2007, it was denounced by some as an “American and Zionist” plot to undermine the identity and values of the country and the Muslim family. And in response to Massad’s observation that gay identities have been adopted mostly by the metropolitan middle classes whilst less powerful groups shoulder the burden of persecution, Whitaker points out that this is the same in the West – it has always been easier, if not easy, for educated middle class people living in cities to proclaim a queer identity and find solidarity in numbers. Their visibility encourages others with fewer social resources whilst also claiming the right to legal recognition and protection. Invisibility might be a cloak of protection for many who practice same sex relations in the Arab world but it does not endow them with civil rights or cultural recognition.

I agree with Kugle and Whitaker that Massad polarises a situation that is far more complex and nuanced and is becoming increasingly more so as the interaction between East and West grows. I think, however, there is a tendency to underestimate the extent to which the West is loathed and viewed with suspicion for its historical and present day geo-political interference in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim countries

in Asia and North Africa. From a dialogical perspective, well intentioned representatives of Western funded human rights organisations may find themselves positioned as patronising, powerful, oppressive and coercive in relation to a subjugated and humiliated other. It is insulting to take lessons in human rights from those associated with the destructive violence of numerous wars, imprisonment, and torture and for Massad particularly, the dispossession of the Palestinians.

Reading these two books side by side, I found myself disconcertingly bouncing between agreeing with two very different viewpoints. Some of the people Kugle interviews find strength and solidarity from LGBT activists outside their religious and ethnic communities, whereas Massad regards the struggle for Palestinian liberation as compromised by the alliances that Muslim gay rights groups make with Zionist and anti -Palestinian forces. Massad perhaps fails to acknowledge that the subjectivities of Muslims who live in and are educated in Western democracies will be formed by the dominant culture and politics of the countries they live in as well as that of their religion, family and communities. Whilst Kugle does not acknowledge that the mostly middle class Western educated Muslims he interviews are not representative of and have a lot more social power than the majority of Arabs and Muslims, Massad is concerned with this. Both express a deep anger about the effects of the

other’s discourses: Massad’s anger about the human rights discourse of the ‘Gay International’ is predicated on two centuries of Western military and cultural interference in the Arab world, not least because Western discourses about Arab and Muslim culture has insinuated its way into the way Arabs construct themselves. In his introduction, Massad writes that he delayed writing his book because he feared it would provoke even more of the Western universalising human rights discourse that he finds so offensive. Whilst Kugle expresses a similar degree of anger about the willingness of Western authorities to overlook the oppression of women and LGBTQI people in some religious organisations associated with ethnic minority communities because they fear being seen as racist.

These two books illustrate the battle for discourse amongst oppressed groups with different political priorities and illustrate how, from a dialogical perspective each discourse can be spoken and heard from a variety of positions. To come down on one side or the other would be to miss the complexity of human experience, whilst to focus only on individuals would be to discount the extent to which much wider political and social forces affect the lives of communities and the people who live in them.

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