

Review - Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity

Written by Federica Caso

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FEDERICA CASO, DEC 19 2014

Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity

By Momin Rahman

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2014)

Momin Rahman's book *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity* is a very timely investigation of the relationship between homophobia and Islamophobia. Since 9/11 Islamophobic sentiments are growing in the West, as demonstrated for instance by the practices of racial profiling at airports and intelligence operations, and Islamic culture(s) are increasingly under global scrutiny for their handling of gender rights. Gender equality as well as sexual diversity have become key parameters for judging civilizational levels. But as Rahman suggests, the gender equality and sexual diversity variables are defined solely in relation to the Western experience. Western conceptions of gender and sexuality have been essentialized and used as quantitative parameters for measuring a given society's modernisation. The book aims at challenging the dialectics between modernity and Islam, and between Western homosexuality and Muslim homophobia that is dangerously feeding Islamophobia across the West. It does so with an intersectional approach that not only de-essentializes gender and sexual categories, but also accounts for the connected historical processes that have produced the contemporary political scenario. By doing so Rahman problematizes the notion of Western exceptionalism often used to mark Muslim societies as uncivilised.

While the book is written in a sociological spirit, it offers invaluable insights into post-9/11 global politics. It tackles notions of modernity and western exceptionalism which are central to the discipline of and debates in International Relations (IR), and highlights the role sexual politics has assumed in the global context since 9/11. Rejecting the modernisation as progress and as westernisation thesis supported by sociologists such as Weeks, who sees sexual agency and diversity as the teleological outcome of political, social and economic liberalisation which displaces traditional and religious values in favour of sexual freedom, Rahman argues that LGBTIQ rights are currently used to mark Western civilizational and sexual exceptionalism and devalue and stigmatise non-Western societies, in a process that he terms homocolonialism. Building upon Duggan's notion of homonormativity, and Puar's homonationalism, Rahman conceptualises homocolonialism as a process of triangulation that legitimises Western exceptionalism. What is triangulated is the understanding of sexual politics as secular and Westerncentric, the homonormative homosexual subject constructed within neoliberal politics and reified within the politics of coming out and public identification, the homonational homosexual subject constructed in opposition to the homophobic non-Western subject, and Muslim homophobia. The novelty of the concept of homocolonialism lays in the fact that it draws attention to the construction of a particular western homosexual subject within the conjunction of domestic and international politics, and simultaneously projects this subject upon Muslim societies in a colonising mode. The Muslim homosexual subject ought to aspire to become like a particular Western homonormative and homonational homosexual subject in order to be sexually liberated.

The process of homocolonialism that according to Rahman defines modernity essentialises cultures and subjects: Western societies are assumed to universally accept sexual diversity, Muslim homophobia is made ahistorical, the Western homosexual is necessarily homonormative and homonational, and the homosexual Muslim aspires to secularism and Western modernity. By using a connected history approach Rahman challenges these essentialised

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views and brings to light the fact that the modern context of sexual politics is the result of intersecting historical processes including: the existence of homo-eroticism in pre-colonial Muslim societies; the irreducibility of Muslim cultures to a single monolithic one; sexual diversity in the West results from capitalism, individualism, and consumerism, alongside democratisation of politics and society; Western colonisation of Muslim societies has introduced the criminalisation of homosexuality; de-colonisation has not led to the return to pre-colonial homo-eroticism because homophobia is often used as a form of resistance to Western neo-colonialism and as an organising principle to maintain internal structures of power within Muslim societies. Because of the different but interconnected historical processes that Western and Muslim societies have undergone, and because of the power imbalances between them, Western and Muslim homosexual subjects are necessarily differently constructed and irreducible.

As part of his aim to challenge the dialectics between Muslim homophobia and Western homosexuality that fuels Islamophobia, Rahman attempts to develop “a framework of Muslim queers as intersectional subject locations” (p.95). In fact, despite heteronormativity is often a feature of Muslim communities, many queer Muslims do not reject their ethnicity and religion, but negotiate them in different ways. In order to bring to live the complexity of queer Muslim subjects he proposes a methodological approach that sees intersectionality as lived experience. He shifts focus from queer Muslim identity politics of oppression to understanding the lived subjectivities and ways of negotiating multiple identities. By proposing an intersectional understanding of queer Muslims, Rahman challenges the essentialised view of the queer Muslim as “impossible” or westernised. Yet, his understanding and use of intersectionality slightly differs from more conventional intersectionality approaches that analyse the racial, gendered, sexual, class layers that make up the subject. He instead focuses on geopolitical and cultural intersectional categories, that is, how the queer Muslim subject negotiates between national, regional and global identity constructions. “Muslim queers as intersectionality”, according to Rahman, “are thus an empirical and epistemological beginning to disrupting the assumed Western superiority in sexual diversity” (p. 116).

The theoretical analysis is complemented with a discussion of the practical implications of the argument put forward. For Rahman an intersectional approach that focuses on the lived experience of queer Muslims indicates that “equality claims are not simply universal but refer to different lived oppressions and hoped-for ‘equal’ ontological conditions” (p. 134). He challenges the view that exporting the Western model of homosexuality will deliver sexual freedom among queer Muslims, and contends instead that we should acknowledge and value the successes of LGBTIQ politics within their social and political contexts. In discussing the importance of multiculturalism and the necessity to respect religious identification and integrity, he argues that religious homophobia should be accommodated insofar as it does not act discriminatorily towards homosexuals. The ways this is a viable expectation in states where religion permeates society, and there is no distinction between secular and temporal powers is not clear in his discussion. This lack of insight might be explained to result from the fact that the book is in some ways “auto/biographical”, and being part of the queer Muslim diaspora Rahman might have not a personal account of this. His only reference to this point is that “it is time for Muslims to criticize and argue against oppression by the West *and* by their own governments and those who benefit from the entrenchment of ideological religious traditions” (p. 150). But this risks falling back into discourses of modernisation and secularisation that he rejects at the beginning of the book. I find more convincing, but probably equally strenuous, the effort of Muslim sociologists and philologists such as Kugle who are revisiting Islamic texts to highlight their ambiguities towards sexuality and homosexuality, and offer a different interpretation. But Rahman notes that there is a lack of support by Muslim communities towards this project, particularly because hetero-nationalism serves to legitimise particular government and community organisations. He concludes suggesting that discussions about gender justice and masculinity and femininity might open spaces for debating sexuality too.

Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity is an asset that contributes to ‘emerging’ debates about sexual politics and queer theory in IR. The ways the book moves beyond the Yogyakarta Principles towards engaging queer theory and its modalities to challenge identity categories and politics, offers insights into how queer theory and IR can be brought into fruitful dialogue in the post-9/11 apex of international sexual politics. The text is well written and structured, and theoretically sound. Methodologically, the book could have been enriched from a full engagement with intersectionality to discuss particularly the ways class intersects with ethnicity and sexuality to construct sexual categories. Class is an important part of the privilege to negotiate identity of which Rahman talks about. And it would

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be interesting to identify how class interplays within both diaspora and local communities and assess similarities and differences. Intersectionality is often used to reinforce the connected history approach. Nonetheless, students and academics interested in global gender and sexual dynamics, cultural diversity and post-9/11 global politics are likely to find *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity* historically insightful, theoretically engaging and politically dynamic.

About the author:

Federica Caso is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland where she is completing a thesis on the body and the militarisation of western post-conscription societies. She is co-editor of *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (E-International Relations, 2015), and her work features in *The Journal of Critical Military Studies* and more recently in the edited volume *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (ed. by Saunders and Strukov, Routledge, 2018). You can follow her on Twitter @Federica_Caso.