

Queering the Pashtun: Afghan sexuality in the homo-nationalist imaginary

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A certain, pathologised image of the Afghan man now dominates the mainstream Western imaginary. This article interrogates representations of Pashtun males in Anglophone media, arguing that these representations are embedded in an Orientalist, homo-nationalist framework. Through a specific focus on the construction of the Taliban as sexually deviant, (improperly) homosexual men, the paper underscores the tensions and contradictions inherent in the hegemonic narrative of 'Pashtun sexuality'. It also revisits the debate about homosexuality as a 'minority identity', arguing that the act versus identity debate is deployed in this context simultaneously to make the Pashtun Other legible and to discredit his alternate ways of being.

Keywords: Afghanistan; homo-nationalism; Orientalism; representation; sexuality

The words 'Afghan man' conjure up a certain image, a pathologised figure, at once freakishly effeminate and monstrously misogynistic that is now associated with most males in Afghanistan. This paper seeks to analyse how the discourse on masculinities is deployed in the Afghan context, examining, in particular, how the Pashtun male has been constructed and represented in mainstream Western accounts. In doing so, it grapples with the theoretically thorny *problematique* of gender by recognising that the logics of femininity and masculinity are always already co-constitutive. In Judith Butler's words, the question of what qualifies as gender is 'itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of "what will be the case" under the rubric of "what is the case"'. Thus, the very description of the field of gender is in no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation.'¹

Indeed, this normative operation of power can be seen at work in the creation of identities and the production of (projected) subjectivities when thinking of both Afghan men and women. This paper analyses the figure of the 'militant'

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Afghan man, most strikingly captured by descriptions of the Taliban, in order to underscore and critically interrogate the specific power relations that make possible the very notion of a ‘Queer Pashtun’ – relations that continue to be sutured and underpinned by an inescapably Orientalist epistemology.

For the purposes of discussion, I understand Orientalism to be that nexus of power/knowledge Foucault sometimes refers to as a ‘regime of truth’ or ‘discipline’.² This regime of truth is bolstered, indeed made possible, by an interpretive community of experts. But Orientalism, in its many variants, does not amount to a unanimous or uncontested body of knowledge and it is in ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’ that Said spells out the contradictions innate in all claims to absolute knowledge:

far from being a defense either of Arabs or of Islam...my argument was that neither existed except as ‘communities of interpretation’, and that like the Orient itself, each designation represented interests, claims, projects, ambitions and rhetorics that were not only in violent disagreement, but also in a situation of open warfare.³

In spite of these violent disagreements and contrasting rhetorics, more often than not the Orient is apprehended as a place of monstrosity, a ‘living tableau of queerness’,⁴ which needs to be disciplined and domesticated through both ‘actual’ and epistemic violence. Although much work has been done to show how our understanding of the Orient is structured around a set of hierarchical binaries, for instance through metaphors of order/disorder and light/darkness, and how these dichotomies create an understanding of the Orient that is rooted in particular relations and constellations of power,⁵ less has been written about the ways in which the narrative of ‘perverse’ ‘terrorist’ masculinities are deployed and have in turn been instrumental in justifying occupation and war in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Equally most work that has been done on ‘constructions of the enemy’ often misses the ambivalences and ambiguities inherent in representations of the Other. The paper aims to fill this surprising lacuna in the literature inspired by Edward Said and postcolonial theory more generally. I apply and extend Jasbir Puar’s notion of homo-nationalism – as a conceptual frame or an analytics of power that enables the acceptance of certain types of white ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ bodies and explicitly disavows other (raced, sexed and classed) bodies as unworthy of protection by nation-states – to the ways in which the male subject of the American-led intervention in Afghanistan has been interpreted and made intelligible.⁶ In contrast to Nikhil Singh’s declaration that ‘the barbarian and the terrorist are specters haunting the liberal-democratic imagination: it is what we are not, what we cannot trust, and therefore what we must subjugate’,⁷ I argue that subjugation is only one of the ways in which ‘otherness’ in the shape of terrorists and barbarians is confronted. The almost obsessive focus on understanding the ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’ mind underscores a desire to more than subjugate and annihilate; it also fundamentally signals a desire to remake in our image these ‘terrorist populations’. The project is at its heart biopolitical – one intimated by constant references to the sexual preferences and positionality of the enemy Other.

By analysing post-intervention newspaper articles published in the USA and UK the objective is to map certain trends in contemporary Western thinking

about Afghan males, to tease out the assumptions inherent in them, and to show how these influential accounts constitute crucial elements of an Orientalist discourse, albeit one that is not always uniform or predictable. The differences between media coverage in the UK and the USA are subtle but perceptible. However, as the paper seeks to show, British newspapers across the spectrum, including left-leaning ones such as the *Guardian* are more-or-less implicated in the promulgation of a skewed notion of the lifeways of men in Afghanistan.⁸

Notwithstanding these differences, an inquiry into portrayals of Afghan men in the Anglophone media reveals the connate imbrication of race and gender. Representations of cultural and sexual difference are co-constitutive; the 'Other' is always already both racialised and gendered. Indeed, the existence of one binary is predicated on the other in important ways.⁹ In spite of this, questions of gender are centred only in a handful of postcolonial accounts, and race is not usually the core concern of most Western feminists.¹⁰ There is an inextricable link between the masculinist and colonialist subject position the Western 'representor' occupies in relation to the 'represented': its Orientalist others. This is as true of depictions of Afghan men by women situated in the West as it is of representations of Afghan women by Western men. To play with Gayatri Spivak's classic formulation, the narrative is no longer only limited to white men saving brown women from brown men, but also includes white women who have joined white men in saving brown women from brown men and also from themselves.¹¹

The Taliban as sexually deviant

In her trenchant appraisal of today's war machine and the politics of knowledge that sustains it in the age of 'securitisation' and global 'war against terror', Jasbir Puar argues that the depictions of masculinity most widely disseminated in the post-9/11 world are terrorist masculinities: 'failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and the body – homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness and disease'.¹² While representations of al-Qaeda as pathologically perverse have permeated the Western mainstream, the Taliban, because of its historically low international profile, has escaped that level of media frenzy.¹³ The attention it does get, however, is almost always mired in Orientalist fantasies of Eastern men as pathologically disturbed sodomisers. The 'high jack this fags' scrawled on a bomb attached to the wing of an attack plane bound for Afghanistan by a *USS Enterprise* Navy officer,¹⁴ while in no way ubiquitous, is certainly an edifying example of our image of the Taliban as perverse and not quite 'normal'.

This perversity of the Taliban has been largely attributed to their *madrassa* upbringing, an all-male environment and their concomitant attitude towards women. Echoing anthropologist Lionel Tiger's concerns that 'it is in the crucible of all-male intensity that the bonds of terrorist commitment and self-denial are formed',¹⁵ Ahmed Rashid claims that the members of the Taliban were brought up in a 'totally male society' in the 'madrassa milieu', where 'control over women and their virtual exclusion was a powerful symbol of manhood and a reaffirmation of the students' commitment to Jihad'. Indeed, 'denying a role for

women gave the Taliban a kind of false legitimacy'.¹⁶ Tiger, focusing on al-Qaeda, offers the conventional and over-stated male-bonding thesis as an explanation for their failed masculinity and sexual perversity:

The terrorism of Bin Laden harnesses the chaos of young men, uniting the energies of political ardor and sex in a turbulent fuel. The structure of al-Qaeda – an all-male enterprise, of course – appears to involve small groups of relatively young men who maintain strong bonds with each other, bonds whose intensity is dramatized and heightened by the secrecy demanded by their missions and the danger of their projects.¹⁷

In this imaginary a lethal mix of male homo-sociality, the segregation of male and female populations and Islamic ideology carves out a space for terrorism and illicit sex. Both al-Qaeda and the Taliban are used as examples of this dangerous concoction. Hetero-sexism here serves a dual purpose in the discourse of terrorist masculinities: on the one hand, it forms the basis for the idea that one reason why the Taliban must be opposed is their lack of tolerance of sexual and gender diversity while, on the other hand, deep-seated anxieties about homo-sociality and same sex desire structure other elements of the stigmatising discourse surrounding the Taliban.¹⁸

In an article entitled 'Homoeroticism among Kabul's Warriors', Michael T Luongo discusses his visit to Afghanistan, epitomising the Western media's problematic reporting on Afghan, especially Pashtun male sexuality, albeit from a sympathetic perspective. In his words:

Afghan men have lived through hardship, killed for their country to free it from the Taliban, and treat guns like fashion accessories, but strict Islamic rule means they've probably never seen a woman naked. Homosexual behavior might simply be a replacement for physical intimacy they can not get otherwise in their lives – a workaround.¹⁹

In classic Orientalist vein Afghan men are constructed as fundamentally different and repressed, with Islam and Kalashnikovs providing the unchanging 'keywords' to the equally constant Afghan 'psyche'.

This repression allegedly manifests itself in surprisingly licentious ways. Sensationalist reportage on paedophilia among so-called terrorist populations has become pedestrian after-9/11 and Pashtun Afghans have been painted, on more than one occasion, as 'queer' sodomisers:²⁰ 'queer' in the sense of a sexual Otherness, always already linked to notions of what Halberstam labels 'failure';²¹ sexually fluid, neither adhering to a single fixed identity nor anchored to a socially sanctioned (Western) morality. The collection of photographs that Thomas Dworzak recovered in 2001 from dusty photographic studios in Kandahar cast the Taliban in a hitherto unfamiliar light – dressed in colourful clothes, reading books and often with kohl applied to their eyes, these photographs scrambled the then dominant image of the Taliban as austere and Spartan religious fundamentalists.²² Dworzak's explicit aim in his work was to portray the Talibs as 'human' and perhaps even 'normal' in their complexity, not the one-dimensional monstrous figures they were conventionally depicted as. However, as Faisal Devji notes in his introduction to *The Poetry of the Taliban*,

‘these images are seen and described as “foreign” or “other”’.²³ That the photographs have largely been interpreted as evidence of a pathological Pashtun tendency towards ‘queerness’ is testament to the pervasiveness of Orientalism, where every instance of difference, alterity and divergence is subsumed in the metanarrative of ‘Otherness’, even when it is in contradistinction to the deftly crafted narrative that preceded it.

The Talib is then transformed to become at once ‘too masculine’ and repulsively effeminate. As a Pashtun, he belongs to the ‘martial races’²⁴ – a designation invented by the British in the 19th century – and is proclaimed to be inherently ‘warrior-like’. These qualities, once used to extol the virtues of Afghans as a ‘noble’, ‘fighting-people’,²⁵ are now used to denounce them as products of a culture of nasty fighting, as lacking tact, diplomacy and cultural finesse. Indeed, as with all discursive regimes, the notion of power (as knowledge) is of paramount importance: we see the culturally sanctioned ‘hegemonic masculinity’ of the 20th century Pashtuns morph into a widely reviled, failed masculinity of the Taliban in the twenty-first century.

Pashtun sexuality

The question of identity is a complex one and, when it comes to sexual identity, the norm has been to think in terms of a hetero/homo binary. In contemporary Western thought homosexuality is constructed as a distinct minority identity, one that is homologous to a racial or ethnic minority.²⁶ Moreover, homosexuality has also until recently been constructed as a secret, as *the* secret, in the immortal words of Eve Sedgwick,²⁷ a phenomenon that is culturally and historically situated. As such, observers in places where homosexuality may not be a taboo are often left mystified. In the words of Brian James Baer ‘Western journalists relentlessly projected onto Kandahar the two great secrets of contemporary American society: closeted homosexuality and child abuse. Viewing homosexuality as something that’s kept secret, Western journalists found the patterns of silence and disclosure in Afghanistan to be rather baffling.’²⁸ This section of the paper explores the difficulties faced by those reporting the sexual practices and behaviour of the Pashtun people, and the ambivalence and tensions that are the inevitable result of the violent imposition of contradictory Orientalising narratives.

One strand of thought prevalent in Anglo-American reporting is what can be called the ‘deprivation’ hypothesis – women are a ‘rare commodity’ in Afghanistan, so men out of desperation turn to other men to satisfy their sexual urges. For instance, an *LA Times* article declares: ‘restrictions on relations with women lead to greater prevalence of liaisons between men’.²⁹ A psychiatry professor is the source of this knowledge. He expounds: ‘it would be wrong to call Afghan men homosexual, since their decision to have sex with men is not a reflection of what Westerners call gender identity’. Instead, he compares these males to prison inmates. They have sex with men primarily because they find themselves in a situation where men are more available as sex partners than are women. ‘It is something they do’ he notes, ‘not something they are’. Indeed, it has even been claimed that there are very few ‘authentic gay men’ in Afghanistan.³⁰

Although Pashtun men are not authentically ‘homosexual’ they are, so this story goes, ‘culturally’ paedophiles. A *Daily Telegraph* headline reiterates this

rather forcefully: ‘Paedophilia Culturally Accepted in South Afghanistan’.³¹ These sentiments are then echoed by the *Examiner.com* which cites US soldiers and Reuters journalists as saying paedophilia is a ‘way of life’ in Afghanistan.³² The *New York Times* contends that paedophilia is the ‘curse’ of ‘male-dominated Pashtun culture’,³³ while Tim Reid of *The Times* writes of the ‘Pashtun obsession with sodomy’, ‘the Taliban’s disdain for women’ and ‘the bizarre penchant of many for eyeliner’. In this environment of degeneracy and deviance, the construal of Pashtun men as not quite homosexual but still engaging sexually with other men (or boys) is a profoundly political act. It lets us, as Western observers, bemoan the ‘state of affairs’ in Afghanistan, all the while allowing us to hope for a brighter future post-intervention. In this liberal humanitarian narrative, by ‘saving Afghan women’ from Afghan men, we are therefore also saving Afghan men from themselves.

However, it appears on occasion as though the prime concern with regard to both homosexuality (or a purported lack thereof) and paedophilia is the palpable discomfort experienced by the foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan. This theme of the noticeable vexation of our troops ‘over there’ is now a prominent one in Anglophone media coverage of the intervention. For instance, in spite of its tongue-in-cheek tone, an article in the *Scotsman* published in 2002 gets to the heart of the matter: ‘In Bagram British marines returning from an operation deep in the Afghan mountains spoke last night of an alarming new threat being propositioned by swarms of gay local farmers.’³⁴ The reactions of the marines, even if not entirely serious, are telling. An Arbroath marine, James Fletcher exclaims: ‘They were more terrifying than the al-Qaeda [sic]. One bloke who had painted toenails was offering to paint ours. They go about hand in hand, mincing around the village.’ In the words of Corporal Paul Richard, the experience was ‘hell’. ‘Every village we went into we got a group of men wearing make-up coming up, stroking our hair and cheeks and making kissing noises’. The inevitable pop-psychologising follows. The author Chris Stephen offers: ‘The Afghan hill tribes live in some of the most isolated communities in the country’. And one of his interlocutors, a marine called Vaz Pickles adds: ‘I think a lot of the problem is that they don’t have the women around a lot... We only saw about two women in the whole six days. It was all very disconcerting.’ In spite of its jocose tone, the grammars of difference – in the form of a deep-seated homophobia and racism – can be clearly seen in operation.

Ben Farmer of the *Daily Telegraph* is more measured: ‘Western soldiers often report unease at the attentions of their Afghan comrades, who are affectionate with each other and sometimes wear make-up’.³⁵ British soldiers found that young Afghan men were actually trying to ‘touch and fondle them...the soldiers didn’t understand’. But even where Western news reportage avoids obvious sensationalism, the concern ultimately remains the same. The *San Francisco Chronicle* that makes the point patently clear: ‘Western forces fighting in southern Afghanistan had a problem. Too often, soldiers on patrol passed an older man walking hand-in-hand with a pretty young boy.’³⁶ The choice of words is instructive: it is Western forces that ‘had a problem’. Indeed, according to the article, ‘all of this was so disconcerting that the Defense Department hired Cardinali, a social scientist to examine this mystery. Her report, “Pashtun

Sexuality”, startled not even one Afghan. But Western forces were shocked – and repulsed.’

According to the article, it was because it was laden with suspicions about the perverse sexual tendencies and inclinations of the Pashtun people that the US military was prompted to conduct an academic inquiry into the ways of these Afghan people. The result was the abovementioned Human Terrain report conducted by the US army.³⁷ Ostensibly conducted to help American soldiers fight better and be more culturally sensitive, the report essentially turned out to be an exercise in sensitising Western fighters to the devious ways of the Other. The report, which claims to draw on ethnographic studies and anthropological expertise, argues:

Military cultural awareness training for Afghanistan often emphasizes that the effeminate characteristics of male Pashtun interaction are to be considered ‘normal’ and no indicator of a prevalence of homosexuality. This training is intended to prevent service members from reacting with typically western shock or aversion to such displays. However, slightly more in-depth research points to the presence of a culturally-dependent homosexuality appearing to affect a far greater population base than [sic] some researchers would argue is attributable to natural inclination.³⁸

The crux of the concern, then, is as much the perceptible discomfort experienced by the Western observer as it is the problem of ‘homosexuality’ or even ‘paedophilia’ in Southern Afghanistan. The source of the discomfort, in line with the report on Pashtun sexuality, is that homosexuality in southern Afghanistan, is (1) ‘culturally-dependent’ and (2) affects a greater number of people than is deemed ‘natural’. Since the report makes a case for ‘Pashtun sexuality’ as neither ‘natural’ nor ‘normal’, but as culturally-sanctioned debauchery, it becomes easy to label Afghan homosexual interactions as ‘inauthentic’.

The argument is that ‘statistically’ gay men are supposed to be a minority and that, given the high incidence of homosexuality in Afghanistan, there is something ‘deviant’ and ‘unnatural’ about this. Indeed, numerous commentaries point out that homosexuality is something ‘they do’ and not something ‘they are’. Inasmuch as gay men are not a minority in Afghanistan, they are not really homosexual; they are merely deprived – of female intimacy. Similarly paedophilia is a cultural ‘norm’ in Afghanistan because of the lack of ‘freely available’ women. In accordance with this reasoning, most same-sex relationships have been reduced to a ‘Pashtun obsession with sodomy’. Not only does this play into a strange identity politics, whereby we decide what they are and how this makes them different from us, it also often functions in accordance with a reductive causation according to which effeminacy is equated with homosexuality. This distinction between homosexual act and homosexual identity is far from straightforward, while the act versus identity debate has become increasingly heated in some circles of queer theory.

Although he sets up the distinction between act and identity in a slightly different manner, the allure of Joseph Massad’s argument in *Desiring Arabs* is unmistakable in this context. If we are, as it appears above, referring solely to sexual acts rather than self-affirming identities, then it is correct to critique the use of labels such as ‘gay’ and ‘homosexual’ as both remiss and incongruous. It

can be convincingly argued that even long term sexual intimacy outside of an established cultural framework for gay relationships need not necessarily be thought of as ‘gay’ in the Anglo-American sense. Massad makes precisely this point in his biting philippic against the ‘Gay International’, which, by his account, is the latest iteration of a colonial onslaught in the Middle Eastern world, all the more insidious as it seeks to transform ‘practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as “homosexual” and “gay”’.³⁹ ‘Benignly’ ethnocentric at best and explicitly violent in its universalising teleological narrative and deliberate erasure of alternate subjectivities at worst, this ‘Gay International’ – an assortment of Western human rights organisations, feminist and gay rights activists and liberal NGOs – has a messianic assimilationist drive that seeks to (re)make as ‘Western subjects’ all members of the human race.

My contention, however, is that, in his zealous, but not wholly unfounded, preoccupation with the imposition of categories, Massad reifies the notion of ‘gay’ and ‘homosexual’ himself, disqualifying the experience of those in the Arab and Islamic world who identify with those terms. In holding up a singular image of the Middle Eastern man as often partaking in same-sex desire but never *love*, Massad ironically mirrors the Gay International by setting the definitional and experiential parameters of legitimate male sexual encounters. If, for the Gay International, the repressive regimes of the Middle East have denied their citizens the right to express their homosexuality, for Massad all rhetoric surrounding a gay liberatory discourse in the Middle East is always already a symptom of Western imperialism. Massad is therefore guilty of circumscribing the ways of being and thinking of the very people he seeks to be defending. Not only does his argument that stable homosexual identity is the sole preserve of the West run the risk of promoting a romanticised vision of the Orient, where sexuality is ever-fluid and constantly at play, it also falls into the reductive logic of what Jalal al-Azm has labelled ‘Orientalism in reverse’.⁴⁰ Orientalism in reverse metes out the same epistemic violence to the ‘Occident’ that Said accuses the Orientalists of committing, that of positing the ‘Occident’, or some aspect of it, as an unvarying fixity. By essentialising ‘Western homosexual identity’ as one that all men sexually attracted to other men in the non-Arab world instinctually attribute to themselves, Massad is certainly guilty of this on more than one occasion. At its core, Massad is making a problematic move that divides ‘gay’ men into two camps worldwide: those in the East who are denied all access to the category of ‘homosexual’ and those in the West who are disallowed from thinking outside of it.

This is a difficult line to tread because, as is reported: ‘hugging doesn’t mean sex locals tell us’ and neither does wearing kohl or colourful sandals.⁴¹ The tension in Western reporting about Afghanistan surfaces yet again when grappling with the openness with which men enter into relationships with other men.⁴² On the one hand, given the ease with which male–male relationships are discussed in Kandahar, one might be forgiven for thinking that the city is exceptionally tolerant. On the other hand, the language used by the reporters hints that these relationships are not consensual and that, even if they are, there is always an undertone of coercion. Indeed, while Tim Reid notes that there seems to be no ‘shame’ or ‘furtiveness’ about Afghan men’s conduct, and others are baffled by the forwardness with which marines are being propositioned, Reid also says that

the young boys involved are ‘marked for life’. The contradiction and paradoxes are rife; Reid’s piece is called ‘Kandahar comes out of the Closet’, although Michael Griffin, also of *The Times* avers: ‘in Pashtun society, man–woman love was the one that dared not speak its name: boy courtesans conducted their affairs openly’.

Baer argues: ‘in their reporting Western journalists insisted on reducing relationships that are often long-term emotional bonds to a crude sexual bargain. *The New York Times*’ Craig Smith, for example, translated the term ‘*haliq*’, which crudely means ‘beautiful boy’, as ‘a boy for sex’.⁴³ In another instance, faced with estimates from her informants that ‘between 18% and 45% of men [in Kandahar] engage in homosexual sex’, Maura Reynolds observed prosaically that this is ‘significantly higher than the 3% to 7% of American men who, according to studies identify themselves as homosexual’. Indeed, this ‘excess’ homosexuality makes Afghans suspect and much more likely to be called queer ‘paedophiles’ and ‘sodomisers’ as opposed to gay men or homosexual. It is telling that the term ‘bisexual’ is not once used to describe these men, who often have wives and themselves admit that they like both men and women. As Reynolds’ local contact, Daud himself tells her: ‘I like men but I like girls better’.⁴⁴

In sum, the (Western) assumption that homosexuality is a ‘minority identity’ and therefore must be connected with secrecy is challenged in the Afghan context. The openness and lack of secrecy surrounding same sex relationships in Afghanistan is what confounds most Western observers. Yet again, it is the desire to make sense of, to make legible these foreign practices that leads to a series of stereotypes and contradictions. That Afghan men may have polymorphous sexual desires or engage in poly-amorous relationships is a possibility that lies beyond the purview of the Western reporter. The messy complexities of a repressive society with its members participating in fluid sexual relationships are too great to comprehend – they are written off as unnatural aberrations in a culture characterised by ‘gynaeophobia’.

The substantial dossier on male–male relationships in Afghanistan is interesting in that it is testament to the myriad ways in which Western reporting has tried to comprehend the idea of homosexuality in a land infamous for its restrictive ‘moral code’. Alternately constructing Afghan male relationships as culturally sanctioned paedophilia, ‘homosexuality’ resulting from a ‘lack of options’ and a perverse understanding of intimacy, these articles provide as much insight into ‘our’ prejudices as they do about ‘their’ customs. On the other hand, the ‘evil’ of homosexuality as a racialised discourse has been adopted even by those self-consciously engaged in the decolonisation of knowledge production.⁴⁵ By unequivocally denouncing homosexuality as an alien imposition in the Middle East by the ‘Gay International’, Joseph Massad partakes of the same racialising discourse, albeit in a drama where the victim and the perpetrator seem to have exchanged roles.

Another wonted assumption that emerges in these reports is the connection between sexist Afghan or Islamic culture and male intimacy. In October 2001 *The Times* published an article entitled ‘Repressed Homosexuality?’, which made explicit this purported link between misogyny and ‘homosexuality’ in Afghanistan by submitting that ‘Taleban misogyny went so far beyond what is normally intended by the word that it qualified as a kind of “gynaeophobia” so

broad that a glimpse of stockinged foot or varnished nail was taken as a seductive invitation to personal damnation'. Indeed, the article argued: 'in Kandahar, the custom of seclusion had given rise to a rich tradition of homosexual passion, celebrated in poetry, dance and the practice of male prostitution. Heterosexual romance, by contrast, was freighted with the fear of broken honour, the threat of vendetta and, ultimately, death by stoning'. It goes on to explain:

The taleb grew to maturity on the gruel of orthodoxy, estranged from the mitigating influence of women, family and village. This made early recruits to the movement disciplined and biddable. If their gynaeophobia appeared as the product of a repressed homosexuality on the march, Taleban cohorts also conjured up echoes of a medieval children's crusade, with its associated elements of self-flagellation and an innocent trust in the immanence of paradise.⁴⁶

In the zeal to ascribe multiple different vices to the Taliban, the overall picture that emerges is both vague and confused: the Talibs are at once women-hating repressed homosexuals by compulsion and ardent gay lovers who have emerged out of a rich tradition of same-sex eroticism and passion.

If the articles cited above are ambivalent towards (ambiguous and contradictory) Pashtun sexuality, the one by Jamie Glazov which appeared in *Frontpage Magazine*, October 4, 2001 is certainly not. It is worth analysing it in some detail, however, because it confronts head-on the assumptions latent in many, if not most, of the aforementioned pieces. Provocatively entitled 'The Sexual Rage behind Islamic Terror' Glazov's article cautions readers about 'Arab' sexual deviancy. The argument can be directly applied to Afghan or Pashtun sexuality. In no uncertain terms, Glazov claims:

Socially segregated from women, Arab men *succumb* to homosexual behavior. But, interestingly enough, there is no word for 'homosexual' in their culture in the modern Western sense. That is because having sex with boys, or with effeminate men, is seen as a social norm. Males serve as available substitutes for unavailable women. The male who does the penetrating, meanwhile, is not emasculated any more than if he had sex with a wife. The male who is penetrated is emasculated. The boy, however, is not, since it is rationalized that he is not yet a man.⁴⁷

In some senses this argument is startlingly reminiscent of both Massad's thesis examined earlier and Foucault's work on ancient Greece.⁴⁸ It can also be viewed as a direct challenge to hegemonic Western understandings of masculinity – we have here a model of masculinity that we are told is both prevalent and culturally desirable. It also scrambles accepted definitions and understandings of homosexuality: 'in this culture, males sexually penetrating males becomes a manifestation of male power, conferring a status of hyper-masculinity. It is considered to have nothing to do with homosexuality. An unmarried man who has sex with boys is simply doing what men do.' Not only do men here 'do' homosexuality without yet *being* homosexual, this act seems to be a culturally endorsed male prerogative. Homosexuality stops functioning as a minority identity; indeed, it becomes delinked from any identity except one that is conditioned by cultural diktat. This has the interesting effect of absolving those critical of Afghan 'homosex' of homophobia. The conclusions drawn

nevertheless pull in a different direction from Foucault and Massad: 'as the scholar Bruce Dunne has demonstrated, sex in Islamic societies is not about mutuality between partners, but about the adult male's achievement of pleasure through violent domination'.⁴⁹

What 'they' partake in, then, is essentially bestial power-play, whereas 'we' engage in meaningful sex built on love and understanding. The author is particularly concerned about the penetrated boys, a concern that is echoed in most commentaries on the issue. They are 'victimized' and 'forced into invisibility' because 'even though the society does not see their sexual exploitation as being humiliating, the psychological and emotional scars that result from their subordination, powerlessness and humiliation is a given. Traumatized by the violation of their dignity and manliness, they spend the rest of their lives trying to get it back.' Ultimately, however, in spite of the many cultural allowances male-male sex is perceived as an affront to masculinity.

The problem is aggravated because 'trying to recover from sexual abuse, and to recapture one's own shattered masculinity, is quite an ordeal in a culture where women are hated and love is interpreted as hegemonic control'. Glazov makes some rather suspect leaps of logic: because women are hated men have sex with boys; they therefore are incapable of loving and their masculinity is under attack. This is primarily a 'cultural problem', not least because:

In all of these circumstances, the idea of love is removed from men's understanding of sexuality. Like the essence of Arab masculinity, it is reduced to hurting others by violence. A gigantic rupture develops between men and women, where no harmony, affection or equality is allowed to exist. In relationships between men, meanwhile, affection, solidarity and empathy are left out of the picture. They threaten the hyper-masculine order.

Notwithstanding the hyperbole, this article illustrates the logics of securitisation at work. Not only is difference dangerous, but equally the danger is difference – presented here in the form of a perverse and pathological challenge to our notions of love and relationships firmly grounded in a hetero-normative, albeit homo-nationalist framework.

The evidence adduced for the allegedly coercive relationships that older men have with younger males is often scant and incidental. Much is made of the sardonic choices of Pashtun men, as though this is automatically indicative of their sexual preferences, which in turn is 'naturally' linked to moral depravity.⁵⁰ The examples drawn on are rather instructive. An opinion piece published in *The New Yorker* in 2002 for instance has argued:

Pashtun men, Kandaharis in particular, are very conscious of their personal appearance. Many of them line their eyes with black kohl and color their toenails, and sometimes their fingernails, with henna. Some also dye their hair. It is quite common to see otherwise sober-seeming older men with long beards that are a flaming, almost punk-like orange color. Burly, bearded men who carry weapons also wear chaplis, colorful high-heeled sandals. I noticed that to be really chic in Kandahar you wear your chaplis a size or so too small, which means that you mince and wobble as you walk.⁵¹

The logic is simplistic: if they do not behave like ‘us’, if they are different in their appearances, choice of clothing, colour of beard, etc – then they must be suspect. Once again, the familiar binaries of sensuality/rationalism, Islamism/secularism and East/West are used as crutches in the face of our own incompetence and inability to confront difference on a level-playing field. The result, as ever, is the naturalisation and perpetuation of these very binaries, which prevents a more nuanced understanding of ‘Eastern’ events, phenomena and subjectivities (in all their multiplicity) in the first place.

To return to Glazov: ‘it is excruciating to imagine the sexual confusion, humiliation, and repression that evolve in the mindsets of males in this culture. But it is no surprise that many of these males find their only avenue for gratification in the act of humiliating the foreign ‘enemy,’ whose masculinity must be violated at all costs – as theirs once was.’ The analogy is clear – the attacks against the USA are the result of pent-up frustration. Those men who have been denied the natural love of a woman attack the bastion of ‘normal’ relationships with a rage that springs from their cultural and sexual perversity, and must be met with like punishment. ‘Violating the masculinity of the enemy necessitates the dishing out of severe violence against him. In the recent terrorist strikes, therefore, violence against Americans served as a much-needed release of the terrorists’ bottled-up sexual rage. Moreover, it served as a desperate and pathological testament of the re-masculinization of their emasculated selves.’ Only by striking at the beacon of sexual prowess can these men hope to win their masculinity back. This lexicon of masculinity, violation, penetration and emasculation serves to underscore not only the nature of the enemy but also the stakes of the war. But it is more than just the gender(ed) identity of the USA as superior masculinity that is being challenged. The USA is battling a threat to its principles, to its ontological security and to its cherished moral code, characterised by freedom, choice and (straight) family values. It is under attack from those who have been coerced into a life of sodomy and hatred. The threat ultimately is biopolitical. And the response also has to be biopolitical – not only has power made life its referent object, but also life must be remade in our image of the ‘natural’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘good’.⁵²

The Muslim in the Closet

The conclusions drawn have repercussions much beyond Kandahar or even Afghanistan. The trope of a racialised, sexually perverse Muslim male has been instrumental in justifying intervention in the Third World and continues to be powerfully mobilised in policy and academic circles in the West. As Paul Amar has compellingly argued ‘these public-discourse versions of masculinity studies and everyday etiologies of racialized Middle Eastern maleness operate as some of the primary public tools for analyzing political change and social conflict in the region’.⁵³ Indeed, the same sets of

vernacular theories also prop up intelligence services and terrorology industries whose wildly inaccurate studies of Islamism and of politics in general in the Middle East are often built upon pseudo-anthropological or psychological-behavioralist accounts of atavistic, misogynist, and hypersexual masculinities. These institutionalized methods of masculinity studies have shaped geopolitics and generated support for war, occupation, and repression in the region for decades.⁵⁴

The fetishised figure of the Muslim man functions as the perfect counterpart to the tyrannised veiled woman – both subjects in need of (Western–liberal) re-making. Although much lip-service has been paid to the need to bolster ‘moderate’ Muslim voices, Saba Mahmood’s point that the essential project of liberalism (or more accurately liberal interventionism) ‘lies not so much in tolerating difference and diversity but in remaking certain kinds of religious subjectivities (even if this requires the use of violence) so as to render them compliant with liberal political rule’ is one that is worth repeating.⁵⁵

In her pioneering *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Sedgwick spells out a contradiction that resounds emphatically in these attempts to paint a portrait of Pashtun sexuality. In her words it is ‘the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance or a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (which I refer to as a minoritizing view) and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view)’.⁵⁶ What is a contradiction against a Western backdrop becomes particularly acute in a society that does not subscribe to the minoritising view but has had it superimposed by sense-making Western interlocutors. This is the problem with more general metaphors of the closet when these are unthinkingly imported into the Afghan context, as seen in the commentaries analysed above.

In the final analysis we have a rather confused motley crew of perversion, discontents, sexual depravities and repressions. The familiar self/other binaries are supplemented by a still relatively unfamiliar one of ‘identity’ vs ‘behaviour/act’. ‘We’ have identity and ‘they’ have behaviour – a profoundly empowering and disempowering manoeuvre, respectively. Only those in and of the West can lay claim to that privileged construct of individual (sexual) identity. Furthermore, in spite of the varied responses to and different reasons put forth for male–male relationships in Afghanistan by their Western observers, a few rigid underlying themes emerge. The most prominent is the role played by Islam. Islam functions as a powerful mobilising trope even when the reference to it is only tangential. The article, entitled ‘Gay old Time in Sharia-land’, is one example. Here, too, the result is paradoxical: images of Oriental excess complement and are simultaneously undermined by theories of ‘Islamic repression’.⁵⁷ The potent trope of the closet, is linked to the mostly unchallenged assumption that homosexuality is analogous to a minority identity. The breadth of allegedly homosexual activity in Kandahar (sometimes ‘detected’ by incidental ‘evidence’ such as kohl-lined eyes) discomposes the most sympathetic of observers and the metaphor of the closet is manifestly misapplied. Finally, much of the reporting can also be read as signalling a latent desire – what we find suspicious is often what we are most afraid of being allured by. The article about marines being propositioned by Afghans that appeared in the *Scotsman* certainly hints at this. The excuse of ‘gay panic’ used by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan when faced with charges of violence and torture are also examples of this same intermingling of fear and desire. The suspicious element, the *objet petit à* in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, is also inherently desirable: we are both scared and in awe of it. Perhaps the Afghan male – sodomiser and paedophile, reeking of Oriental lasciviousness — serves the same purpose in the Western imaginary.

Conclusion

This article has argued that our understanding of the Pashtun male is mediated by an Orientalist, specifically homo-nationalist, framework, in which accusations of ‘deviance’ and ‘queerness’ take centre-stage as organising principles in making sense of the ‘Other’. The treatment of the Afghan male in mainstream Anglophone discourse provides a compelling counterpart to the narrative of the victimised Afghan woman. However, the discourse on Afghan masculinities is rife with contradictions, with the inherent ambiguity and flux in its system of representations signalling the impossibility of achieving a stable Orientalist understanding of the Afghan man and Pashtun sexuality.

The contradictions, in point of fact, extend beyond the representations of Afghan sexuality. They also emerge in the ways in which the accusation of deviance functions in Western discourse. On the one hand, there exists a suspicion of ‘queerness’ in and of itself, a homophobic suspicion that insulates itself from such challenges by locating queerness in particular narratives of deviance and of naturalness which serve to Orientalise and confer distance. But this suspicion coexists with a supercilious celebration of the stability of liberal Western discourses on sexual difference. Much of the affective dimension involved in highlighting alleged Islamic sexual deviance, in its multiple forms and sites, seems to be located in the identification of *hypocrisy* that is at work – a certain pleasure, a *jouissance*, in noting the instability of the austere Islamic/terroristic identity which, while on the surface presenting itself as a traditional and moral challenge to liberal hegemony, always founders on closer inspection and, in the face of strict moral codes, collapses into deviance. Thus, the supercilious morality of the strict Islamists is purportedly revealed as fiction. In this narrative the deviance of the Islamic subject is not noteworthy and enjoyable because deviance is wrong *per se*, but because it is in this very deviance that we can read the fiction of the Islamic project. *Our* superior liberal politics can accommodate deviance *and* morality without contradicting itself, whereas *theirs* is a politics of false promise, patent hypocrisy and a repressed pathological tendency to queerness. It is through the re-inscription of powerful ironies such as these that the general tenor of homo-nationalism as a project of modernity establishes and perpetuates itself, and that the Afghan man is (re)constituted as a pathological, slippery and liminal Other.

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Notes

1. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxii.
2. Foucault uses the word differently as a noun and a verb, although the two meanings are intricately interconnected in his formulation.
3. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," 89.
4. Said, *Orientalism*, 103.
5. In particular, excellent recent work has been done that examines the counterinsurgency discourse: the construction of insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan as the source of disorder and chaos that can only be corrected by the current intervention, which penetrates into the 'heart of darkness'. See, for instance, Barkawi and Stanski, *Orientalism and War*, especially the chapter by Gusterson, "Can the Insurgent Speak?"
6. Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism."
7. Pal Singh "The Afterlife of Fascism."
8. 'Skewed' is used here in its original sense as 'asymmetrical' or lop-sided, not to mean 'distorted' or necessarily misrepresented.
9. Owens, "Torture, Sex and Military Orientalism."
10. Meyda Yegenoglu takes exactly this as her point of departure and analyses how these concerns are always already overlapping. For her, 'representations of the Orient are interwoven by sexual imageries, unconscious fantasies, desires, fears, and dreams. In other words, the question of sexuality cannot be treated as a regional one; it governs and structures the subject's every relation with the other.' Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 25. For other works that take the overlap between race and gender as their point of departure, see Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"; Ong *Flexible Citizenship*; and Butler *Frames of War*. While much lip-service is paid to this mutual implication of race and gender, a thorough analysis of difference as inescapably and inseparably raced and gendered remains a rarity.
11. The colour of skin is less important here than the subject's positionality. A light-skinned Afghan man could be metaphorically saved by Oprah Winfrey.
12. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xiii.
13. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 posters appeared in Manhattan with an image of Osama bin Laden with the words: 'The Empire Strikes Back...So you like skyscrapers, huh bitch?'. Owens, "Torture, Sex and Military Orientalism." There is also the famous South Park episode where Osama bin Laden is depicted as having a small penis. For other instances of caricatures of al-Qaeda as a band of homosexuals, see Puar, 2007.
14. Owens, "Torture, Sex and Military Orientalism," 1042. It is important nevertheless to recognise the fact that 'fag' is now used as a pejorative label encompassing more than sexuality, while continuing to rely on an entrenched bias against homosexuals for much of its force.
15. Cited in Puar, 56.
16. Rashid, *Taliban*, 111.
17. L. Tiger, "Osama Bin Laden's Man Trouble," *Slate Magazine*, September 28, 2001.
18. Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture and Time", explores how this sort of paradoxical reasoning is integral to the way the 'West' wages modern war by 'framing' certain populations as existential threats in an often contradictory manner.
19. M. T. Luongo, "Gay Afghanistan: Homoeroticism among Kabul's Warriors," GlobalGayz.com, January 1, 2009. <http://www.globalgayz.com/asia/afghanistan/gay-afghanistan-homoeroticism-among-kabul-s-warriors/>.
20. L. Chibbaro, "New Afghan Rulers Better for Gays." *Washington Blade*, December 21, 2001; and Varnell, "Why Gays should Support the War on Terror."
21. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Through her reading of popular culture, especially animated film, Halberstam imaginatively reclaims the concept of 'failure' and in so doing provides an account of 'the queer' not as a singularity but 'as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise' (p 29). The documents analysed use 'queer' in its original derogatory sense, preserving its association with 'depraved' and 'degenerate' sexual acts.
22. Dworzak *Taliban*.
23. Devji, "Foreword," 30.
24. Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab*, 99, 105.
25. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*.
26. See, for instance, Fassinger and Miller, "Validation of an Inclusive Model."
27. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.
28. Baer, "Closely Watched Pashtuns," 2.
29. M. Reynolds, "Kandahar's Lightly Veiled Homosexual Habits," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2002.
30. Luongo, "Gay Afghanistan."
31. B. Farmer, "Paedophilia Culturally Accepted in South Afghanistan," *Daily Telegraph*, January 13, 2011.
32. <http://www.examiner.com/article/afghan-pedophilia-a-way-of-life-say-u-s-soldiers-and-journalists>.
33. C. Smith, "Shh, It's an Open Secret: Warlords and Pedophilia," *New York Times*, February 21, 2002.

34. C. Stephen, "Startled Marines find Afghan Men all Made up to See Them," *Scotsman*, May 24, 2002.
35. Farmer, "Paedophilia Culturally Accepted in South Afghanistan."
36. Joel Brinkley, "Afghanistan's Dirty Little Secret," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 29, 2010.
37. A. M. Cardinali, "Pashtun Sexuality." HTT AF-6 Research Updates and Findings, 2009. https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:znKX3soYgusJ:www.imagesoflife-online.co.uk/HTTAF6.doc+&hl=en&gl=uk&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEsSiZiEbiz7AsASvZJTH23FgQ5B6laCMaNWwgIOnSlyRet97PILB5a5P8Cn gE6SDZGAQSWljhVM1GYm7JEFohnc_sYQrTJWtzVW7GRakTBgfHVne383yiRnmFvFGWE0XMgQZ XiBG&sig=AHIEtbQkkHkrBIEaY8ZXLyadp3aJPdRnRg.
38. Ibid.
39. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 162.
40. Jalal al-Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," 26.
41. Moreover, male affection and intimacy can just as easily be constructed as symptomatic of conflict-ridden environments as of salacious cultural traditions. For instance, in a different context it has been credibly proposed that: 'in Peru too, male veterans recounted experiences of transformation: Male tenderness...which is there, or at least I have experienced it with people, with whom we joined together in the early phases and also served time in prison. I believe that there develops a very, very strong feeling, which is beyond gender...being a militant and living in the underground makes you tough, but at the same time allows new forms of tenderness, a tenderness, which you would not express in a normal situation...there was a lot of affection between men...But it was not a gay thing. Not at all. It was masculine affection of support and of strength.' See Ortega, "Looking Beyond Militarized Masculinities."
42. This may be a tension that is reflective of the tension 'on the ground', as it were.
43. Baer, "Western Reporting."
44. This is an erasure that also often figures in discussions of Western homosexuality.
45. See also Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*.
46. M. Griffin, "Repressed Homosexuality?" *The Times*, October 5, 2001.
47. Glazov, "The Sexual Rage behind Islamic Terror," *Frontpage Magazine*, October 4, 2001 (emphasis added).
48. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*.
49. Glazov, "The Sexual Rage."
50. Hamid Karzai, the Pashtun president of Afghanistan has similarly had his dress commented upon on many occasions, including in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*.
51. J. L. Anderson, "After the Revolution," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2002.
52. 'Out there', ie in Afghanistan.
53. Amar, "Middle East Masculinity Studies."
54. Ibid.
55. Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 328.
56. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1–2.
57. The term 'repressive hypothesis' was coined by Michel Foucault and used for the (Victorian) West. In this instance I am merely referring to the argument that Islam is inherently repressive, something which has become common currency in the Western world, broadly defined.

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