
During the past half century or so, a great deal has been written about Islam-West relations. Most of the discourse is about hard politics and military encounters. In fact, the same is true for most of the historiography of the world where it is the history of warfare that is virtually deemed to constitute history. From a historian’s eye (or pen), ordinary mortals, with their mundane concerns and banal life choices, are seldom considered worthy of inclusion in the historical discourse. That economic progress, religious transformation, emergence of new literary patterns, and other facets of the story of humankind are serious subjects of historical study has been discovered by historians fairly recently. It is no surprise, therefore, that the study of human behavioural patterns as well as of their transition over time have passed on to the historians from the erstwhile exclusive domain of anthropologists.

Quite evidently sex is a basic human physical urge, an essential recurring part of human life, and the sole way for the human race to continue as a species on this planet. That being the case, perhaps only sociologists can tell why sex—even legitimate sex—became a mystery, a stigma, a shame, and what not, among nations at different points in time in their historical trajectories. Today’s Muslims mostly hold the same notions about sexuality as the Europeans did up until one or two generations ago. Little wonder, then, that one cannot find any serious study on patterns of sexual behaviour across the Muslim world, even by a Western writer. This is largely because a Muslim man or woman is generally disinclined to share any intimate details about this aspect of their life. The history of sexual interaction between the Europeans and the people of the Middle East is a highly under-exploited area of research. The present work seeks to fill this void.

It has been rightly said that one can never understand another person without a long and close relationship. The upshot of this seems to be that nations understand each other better if intermarriages take place between them with some degree of frequency. Human sexuality effectively contributes to unifying two human beings. On the other hand, sexual prejudices and acquired inhibitions also create alienation among nations. In the 18th and 19th centuries, inherited sexual notions coloured everyday relations between the Arabs of the Middle East and the visiting Europeans. More lately, that is, in the 20th century, when the flow of humans has reversed its direction, it has affected the interaction between the Europeans living in the West and the
Arabs visiting or emigrating to Europe.

For centuries, the Muslim-West relations have been constructed on false myths, assumed decadence and enigmatic nature of the other side. For the West, the East was exotic. Among the things that most enthralled European observers were two aspects of Oriental feminine life — *Harem* and veiling (p. 7). Muslims, both men and women, were believed to be inherently violent and irredeemably lustful. Medieval writers vied with one another in ascribing the most depraved traditions to Islam, associating homosexuality, incest and bestiality with this religion (p. 10). One of the arguments recurrently made, for instance, was that the hot and dry weather in Muslim lands results in violent passion for sex (p. 15).

On the other hand, Muslims too had somewhat similar notions about Christians and their values, not the least because of the Crusades. Admittedly, one of the “most shameful episodes in the history of Christianity” (p. 11) took place when, in 1204, the knights, en route to fighting a holy war against the Muslims, ravaged their own holy papal city of Constantinople and its [Christian] women as well. Memories of centuries of crusades have not been obliterated from the Muslim collective memory even now. Events like the one mentioned above led to popularization of myths among Muslims that European men were obsessed with sex — be it rape of Arab women whom they succeeded in laying hands on in a Muslim land, or their own Christian women, as in 1204, when their onslaught was repulsed by the Muslims. Muslims have believed that one of the motives for Crusaders was sex — because the crusaders’ own women, back home in Christian lands, were unattractive, being “like winter plants... colorless and tasteless... sickly faces tormented by hunger” (p. 41).

It was in the 18th and 19th centuries when travel had become easier and more real-life interactions had begun to take place between Europeans and Arabs that the first cracks appeared in the previously held stereotypical images of each other. Lady Mary Montagu, wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire, mentioned in her *Letters* published in 1838, that the Turk/Muslim “women have more liberty than we have and that they do not commit any more sins for not being Christians” (p. 18). Another outstanding lady, Lucie Duff Gordon, writing during her residence in Egypt (1865–1867) found it “startling” that “rules of morality applied with perfect impartiality to both sexes” in the Muslim societies (p. 155). Female writers later on also pointed out that if any Muslim man was “so depraved as Christians assumed, the legitimate wives would immediately demand divorce” (p. 40). Just like social inhibitions existed for a Muslim man to have intimate relations with other women, it was next to impossible for a Muslim woman to be unfaithful,
since for [an Eastern] man, “it would be revolting to possess a woman not entirely his” (p. 41). Thus, adultery seldom existed in the Arab lands except in brothels, which came about in greater numbers with the advent of the European influence. As we shall see below, European men’s taste for Oriental brothels was because of various psychological reasons, rooted in long separation from their legitimate partners, i.e. wives, as opposed to some inherent moral failure in European society back home. This was discovered by Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) as he recalls in his Notes de Voyage, his account of Eastern experiences—that for a European, ordinary meetings with Egyptian women were impossible except in brothels. No surprise, then, that with a European clientele, a substantial proportion of prostitutes in Tunisia, Algiers and Alexandria, were European.

Gerald de Nerval (1808–1855), a French Orientalist, sums up the issue most succinctly by saying that Muslims’ beliefs and customs “differ so much from ours” that the Europeans could only judge them from the “perspective of our own relative depravity” (p. 42). He took pains to underline the “dignity and very chastity” that characterizes the husband-wife relations in the Muslim context (p. 42). He did not believe that many Christian-Muslim sexual encounters could have taken place in Muslim lands. So travellers’ narratives back in Europe about their [sexual] exploits in the Middle East were mostly exaggerations or fabrications.

The story of sexual interaction between Europe and the Middle East shall remain incomplete without discussing the colonial period. Ronald Hyam’s assertion that sexual dynamics crucially underpinned the whole operation of the British empire and Victorian expansion is quoted by the writer (p. 2). It may well be an overstatement. However, the sexual dimension of imperialism cannot be totally denied either.

Victorianism denotes more than the 64-year long reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) when the British Empire rose to its glory, becoming the paramount power of the world. The term rather signifies a set of attitudes and values that most Englishmen and women shared (or suffered from) including hard work, exaggerated religious probity, and more than anything else, moral restrictiveness in the domain of intimate relationship between the spouses. Women in particular were supposed to be modest, shy and passive in conjugal relations. This was because of the Victorian inhibitions which sought to denigrate the element of pleasure. Although the whole social structure rested on the notion of permanent marriages (divorce or remarriage being no-no affairs), married life was robbed of a great deal of its charm owing to an exuberance of puritanism.

Many Victorian males spent long periods abroad in overseas colonies with
no access to their equally-lonely wives back home. This would sometimes prompt them to go to any length to try to have a sexual encounter. It was not for nothing that the concept of a Victorian male became almost synonymous with sex, prostitution, and pornographic literature. Sexual exploits in the East were not always coincidental to their professional duties entailing sojourns in the far stretches of the empire. Rather, many British or French men would choose to go East only to escape from the moral straightjackets of the frustrating Victorian morals. Thus, over time, social double standards developed for males and females in regard to sexual behaviour, backed by the so-called scientific theories that women were not troubled with sexual feelings (p. 51). That no readily available women could be found on the streets and bazaars and in any harems in the East that they had so much heard about in fantastic stories back home, must have been truly disappointing for the visiting European males.

A time came when the imperial governments started sending wives to the colonies to live with their husbands but that too was contingent upon the sweet will of capricious Governors who could and would make their own rules. One British Governor put a sixty days limit on the wives’ visit to British officers in Sudan as he thought that wives were a distraction to their duties (p. 198). European wives themselves were not always comfortable in the colonies. What was more discomforting for them was when one found that the [Muslim] Turkish and Egyptian ladies were “as likely as not, better born, better bred, better read, better looking and better dressed, as herself” (p. 72).

Intermarriages remained frowned upon, and the British Foreign Office would recall an officer interested in marrying an Indian or Egyptian woman, though rarely such nuptials were effected. Occasional intermarriages did not mean racial fusion; in fact, the offsprings would not be totally owned by either nation. The Europeans were concerned that Muslims might try to penetrate their society by marrying their women—something that was destined to take place a few generations down the road in the post-colonial age. Visiting brothels was also discouraged by the colonial administration, not the least because of the spread of VDs, but also because it was deemed unbecoming of officers. However, the colonies remained a hunting ground for British girls looking for a husband, mainly from the British civil service or its military officer corps.

A final comment on the origins of such sexual ethos is in order. The all-male environs in Anglo-European boarding schools led boys to grow with strange notions about girls as something enigmatic; hence their reluctance to interact with the fair sex and their uneasiness in their company. On top of it, having sexual thought was deemed unmanly and improper—something to be
ashamed of. Girls too were supposed to blush at any hint to their physical role in the continuation of the human race. A girl desperately looking for a match was supposed to show a public face that she was not really obsessed—not even concerned—about having a man to share her life with. Romance with the opposite sex was considered obscene in all its forms and it was not easy for everyone to come out of this state of mind even after marriage. With these hostile social notions on sex, paradoxically, the life long sexual partnership, through marriage, was still revered as a sacred moral duty and put in high esteem. Unhappiness in marital life was frequent, and sex was looked upon more as a duty to bear children than as something that would yield pleasure to oneself or intimacy with one’s partner (p. 173).

The later part of the 20th century saw a reverse emigration from Muslim lands to Europe mainly for economic reasons. Muslim experience of the opposite sex in alien lands was quite the opposite of what the Europeans had in Arab countries: mysterious seclusion replaced by obvious exposure (p. 245). This was Afro-Arab men’s turn to be frustrated and disappointed when their mistaken ideas that every Western woman was easily available for sex were shattered.

Yes, nations continue to define or decry each other by their presumed sexual mores. Muslim preachers in their writings and sermons highlight the theme of Western decadence and moral laxity (personified by unveiled women) (p. 277). By quoting statistics about divorce, rape and illicit sex in the West, they continuously express the fear that the West wants to export this moral depravity to Muslims. At least this is something on which religious scholars like Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1367/1948) of Egypt, Mawlāna Sayyid Abū ‘l-A‘lā Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979) of Pakistan and statesmen like Dr Mahatir Mohammad of Malaysia think in unison. Sex again has its role in defining the “other”!

Saad S. Khan


A small number of intellectuals in Egypt formed a group in early 1980. It included Kamal Abu Magd, Fahmy Huwaidy, Shaikh Muhammad al-Ghazzaly