

Fathers of men: review of Massad's *Desiring Arabs* (2007)

Written by Eric Walberg

4/6/9 -- The Western "civilising" project in its many guises has given rise to strange bedfellows. Not only do Christian and Islamic fundamentalists -- officially enemies of each other -- find common cause in demanding more public displays of religiosity and less liberal social policies regarding sex. In fact, as Joseph Massad shows in his new book, *Desiring Arabs*, both parties -- again, paradoxically, as enemies of the international gay movement -- actually work in tandem with that very movement, aiding in the process of defining people according to the Western paradigm of hetero-homo sexual categories, which, prior to the 19th century, did not even exist.

This is the central thesis in Massad's controversial study, which surveys Arab social history as constructed by Arab scholars and writers themselves from the 19th century on, heavily influenced by Western thought and research methods.

Since the French and British invasions of the Arab world in the 19th century, Western methodology has been adopted by Muslim scholars analysing their own history (in Western terminology, "heritage"), producing the paradigm of the decadent, backward, unreformed past, which required an "Arab renaissance" (a project which dates from the late 19th century) and the adoption of the so-called Western civilising mission of modernity -- the separation of the state and the religious establishment, electoral democracy, industrialisation, "emancipation" of women, now including the codification of people according to some essentialist sex drive.

Western studies of the Middle East from the 19th century on developed into a school widely called Orientalism, which recognises Islam as a variant of Christianity but still defines it as "un-culture". The missionary aim was not so much Christianisation as modernisation. Missionaries from the start saw Islam as some form of Christian heresy, realising that Muslims understood their creed as God's final correction of the monotheistic faith which encompasses Judaism and Christianity, but which in these versions had been corrupted by adherents, making reversion to Christianity apostasy. Religion remains embedded in the lives of Muslims in way it is not for Christians or Jews, and "reforming" this seems to be the focus of the civilising mission today.

The same essentially missionary aim of the West took a very different path in non-literate Africa, where animistic religions could adapt and absorb Christianity relatively easily.

Whereas in the Middle Ages the West viewed the Muslim world as licentious, permitting perversions such as sodomy, by the 19th century, the tables were turned, with the Muslim world viewing the West as licentious, the intervening development being the rise of capitalism in the West and the degeneration of morals in cities. The rising middle class developed the proverbial Victorian prudishness, which became the template for a reactive Muslim morality, condemning what came to be known as homosexuality (a medical term first coined in Europe in the 19th century). Over the next century and a half, manifestations of this "disease" were considered a direct consequence of Western interference in the Islamic world, the sense behind Iranian President Ahmedinejad's insistence that "There is no such thing as homosexuality in Iran."

Along with this new Victorian prudery came a yet another reaction: the "gay liberation" movement. Both trends presuppose that people can be catalogued according to some innate sexual preference. While the conservatives deplore these defective souls, gay lib has lauded them as unjustly oppressed and demanded equal rights with heterosexuals (another newly coined medical term). This Manichean worldview is still the dominant framework for both pro and anti parties, the latter now including religious fundamentalists of all faiths.

The Western mission picked up steam in the late 1960s, with feminism and gay lib in the West and the failure of Nasserist socialism and Arab nationalism. The latter were of course defeated by that other "civilising" mission of the West: Zionism. With the Arab world weak and divided, its intellectual arm became even more captive to the Orientalist post-colonial agenda, backed by the West's imposing economic might. The socialist bloc's influence continued to weaken, and today virtually all intellectual life is dominated by Western concepts and categories, including sexual ones. 1967 was a turning point for the Arab world, not only politically, but in all aspects of life, and only Islam could provide an alternative worldview, though one which already severely crippled by Western cultural hegemony, comprador regimes and, when these fail, overt aggression.

Whatever their intent, international gay activists have ended up replicating and even strengthening in other cultures the very situation of repression they set out to challenge in their own countries. Massad writes, "The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalised by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating."

The advocates of this paradigm advocate what looks like a scientific, essentialist programme that the entire world should adopt. What it is, however, is a kind of Western secular nativism

seeking to replace what it sees as backward nativisms everywhere, forcing one and all to choose their slot. Woe to those who reject their paradigm, for the comprador elites and religious establishment have already been forced to fight the battle on the West's terms, implicitly accepting the Western paradigm as their own. Practitioners of msm (men having sexual relations with men) who reject the gay slot created for them by Western activists are catalogued as "self-hating" and guilty of "homosexual homophobia".

But could it be that the entire Orientalist framework, now including gay and lesbian "human rights", is a complete scam? While there are indeed sexual acts between men or between women, these acts must always be considered in their social setting. Msm occurs in varying degrees in all societies but in radically different ways, just as it does in nature. Even for biological oddities such as hermaphroditism, however, it is contrary to nature to divide people up merely according to their acts. Msm increases in certain social settings, such as urbanisation, segregation, commodification, war, social trauma, repressive upbringing and others, which can be explored by social scientists. But in non-literate societies, while rare instances of crossdressing and role reversal have happened, most msm takes place without much notice, and is more or less widespread depending on the social setting in which the acts are embedded.

The difference between East and West in this respect, as Massad suggests, lies in the fact that the entire so-called civilising mission has not been completed in the Arab world. The struggle over "gay rights" is merely one, albeit an increasingly important arena for this struggle. I would add that the real difference is the relative lack of objectification in the Muslim world prior to the invasions of the colonial era and the imposition of Western capitalism and science.

The supposedly scandalous verses of the medieval poet Abu Nuwas were more of a problem to the prudish Victorians than they ever were to Arabs or Muslims. Even Mahfouz's 1947 *Midaq Alley* shows the main character Kirshah infatuated with a young man, which only becomes a scandal when he fails to keep his liaison discrete and his headstrong (and jealous) wife finds out. His 1957 *Sugar Street*, by contrast, portrays a very different scenario, with the now Western homosexual stereotype embodied in the thoroughly Westernised upper class Pasha and his protege Radwan, whose desires constitute an identitarian self-questioning, spurning women, diseased, not fitting into society, identifying with the colonial mentality which the ruling elite now embraces. Significantly, Radwan is condemned not by his Islamist cousin, but by his communist one.

Traditional Islamic society operated on the principle of social order, tolerating sins such as fornication and msm so long as they are sufficiently discrete. It defined man as a social being with social obligations, not an isolated ego pursuing his individual desires. Though communism is in other respects the logical conclusion of the civilising mission, in practice communist regimes tolerated discrete msm much like traditional Muslim societies, not attempting to colonise desire to the same extent that capitalism does.

Today the civilising mission of the "Gay International" (as Massad provocatively puts it) is to pluck individuals out of their social setting, forcing them to define their very essence according to certain acts, and then endow them with universal personal rights to perform these acts and encourage others to perform these acts wherever they like, be it in Teheran, Mecca or New York. In pursuing this invasive policy, it continues the work of Christian missionaries, paving the way for the economic system that imperialism seeks to spread across the world, giving Western forces more room to incorporate other societies into its domain, and in the process, rewriting history.

This vital and obvious point escapes even the venerated iconoclast Michel Foucault, author of the monumental *History of Sexuality*, who omits the cultural effects of colonial systems on conceptions and constructions of sexuality, implicitly endorsing the universalist agenda. Foucault lists the objects of discourse on sexuality from the 19th century as "the masturbating child, the 'hysterical woman', the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult", but critic Ann Stoler argues that Foucault ignores that all four imply "a racially erotic counterpoint", "the libidinal energies of the savage, the primitive, the colonised".

Not all Westerners are caught up in this Orientalist subterfuge. Some Western novelists have shown an appreciation of the value of social mores that the civilising mission is intent on destroying, much as Western ecologists struggle to save endangered species such as whales or apes. Edward Said argues that André Gide, Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, E M Forster, Paul Bowles and others saw in the colonial setting "a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden", and cherished it in the face of Victorian repression and objectification. But this anti-modern trend in thinking still has no articulate spokesman other than Said -- or Massad.

Massad's frontal assault on the gay lib crusade aimed at the Muslim world is a defiant call to resist the Orientalist project. Massad in effect describes a litmus test for anyone, Western or Eastern, as to whether they understand the Arab world: whether or not s/he resists the slick campaign to divide people according to their sexual acts, a false duality. The fact that the battleground is the Middle East is no coincidence. The litmus test for the other Western

"civilising" project here is of course whether s/he resists the project to divide people according to a false concept of race. Ironically, it is Muslims who stand in the way of both.

Massad hints that overcoming the capitalist and colonial mindset in both centre and periphery will require bringing the sacred back into sexuality; in fact, it is in rediscovering the sacred, which Western secularised society has lost. It is the West that must learn from the East, not vice versa. This was recognised long ago by Muslims visiting Europe. The imam Rifaah Al-Tahtawi visited Paris in 1834 and noted "the dearth of chastity among many of their women, and the lack of jealousy among their men... how... adultery for them is a vice and a shame but not a primary sin... [Paris] is charged with abominations, innovations, and perdition, although the city of Paris is the wisest city of the entire world and the home of world-based science." The contradiction between this admiration for the secular achievements of the West and disgust with the social mores would remain the dominant theme for East-West relations over subsequent centuries.

One generalisation of the Orientalists that rings true is that Western societies suffer from guilt (they argue this is because only Westerners have a conscience), while Arab societies suffer mainly from shame. Rather than a more elevated conscience in Westerners, in fact, evidence points towards a less destructive and freer conscience in non-Western societies. Errant or questionable behaviour from society's point of view is tolerated as long as it is discrete, governed by the individual's sense of obligation to the community, which is also that individual's conscience.

Why is guilt "better" than shame, or more conscionable? A society less addicted to guilt is by no means less developed, and in fact most likely provides greater positive emotional orientation than one steeped in guilt, as indeed Christian society has been. The Western secular aim to do away with guilt, to embrace acts which were formerly considered antisocial, such as fornication and msm, has hardly created a social paradise, considering the malaise of Western society, not to mention its wars. Where is the accounting for the sins of US leaders who condoned widespread torture, including sexual torture? Where is the guilt in such figures as Bush or Cheney?

The rise of gay lib in the West resulted from a complexity of factors, including the relatively repressive nature of Christianity/Judaism, the rise of capitalism, and urbanisation. The imposition of this paradigm on the Muslim world is more than an affront. It has produced both greater official repression of any social deviance and, at the same time, a proliferation of sexual tourism, with Western gays finding the less rigid sexuality of the Muslim world liberating despite official opprobrium. This is a dilemma for Western-oriented Arab regimes, which want

to benefit financially from tourism but are ultimately the protectors of their societies, undermining their legitimacy.

Arab intellectuals have for the most part gone along with the Western universalist agenda, leaving the field bereft of any substantive critique prior to Massad's. For instance, Lebanese writer Rayyan Al-Shawaf criticises "Massad's relativism -- stemming from his accurate observation that 'homosexuality' is alien to Arab same-gender sexual traditions," which implicitly rejects any "call for universal freedom of sexual identity." Al-Shawaf argues that, "in postulating the inevitability of (heterosexual) Arab violence wherever there is gay and lesbian assertiveness, Massad preemptively exonerates the perpetrators -- whether individuals or the state -- of any wrongdoing. However regrettable their behaviour, those Arabs who react violently to the gay rights campaign are not perceived by Massad as responsible for their actions, but as caught up in a broader struggle against 'imperialism', to which the gay rights movement is wedded."

It is hardly fair to put such words into Massad's mouth. However, his call for historicising and socialising sexual relations does challenge and even threatens the entire Arab intellectual world, including Al-Shawaf. Rather, Massad points to the direction that further intellectual reflection should take. Frequent attempts to waylay medieval and other authors writing in Arabic into the gay lib camp are exposed as fraudulent, as is the mistake of projecting current Western analytical categories onto other cultures and other eras. The only universal here is the eternal gap between labels on the one hand and the polymorphous, elusive, mysterious nature of sexual desire on the other. When it comes to sex, so to speak, nothing is black-and-white.

Just as the West's "civilising" missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are grimly moving forward, despite the horror they are inflicting on all who come in contact with them, the Disneyfication of social life throughout the Arab world grinds on, however entertaining and superficially comforting it may be to those Arabs literate enough to read subtitles. But both missions are in trouble, faced with committed Islamic and other opposition (the socialist and nationalist forces are not completely defeated, despite being heavily compromised).

Of course, the entire arsenal of the West is hard at work supporting the mission. Take, for instance, "honour" crimes in Muslim countries, which are loudly and incessantly condemned in the Western media, having been taken entirely out of context. While any murder is heinous, the

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context here is that Muslim countries actually have far lower murder rates than Western countries, and in fact one third of all women murdered in the US are murdered by boyfriends or husbands. Rare floggings and hangings for sexual crimes in the Muslim world (sometimes captured on a mobile phone and broadcast around the world) contrast with the daily nightmare of US prisons, where rape and drug addiction are endemic, or the brutality of Western police in intimidating the brave souls who dare protest the outrages of Western imperialism.

The true success of modernity can perhaps best be judged by the fact that the US has the highest rate of incarceration in the world.

There is a need for a discourse that "can invoke older forms, identities, and practices in the service of a future that is not just social reproduction or degeneration," i.e., not just reproducing the existing reactive impasse, not caving in to the Western imperial agenda. The first step is to make clear that Orientalism's cultural framework is at the heart of the problem, a task which Massad fulfils admirably. The place of sexual desire in the discourses and practices of modernity must be opened up, freed of the phoney universalising agenda. "It is at these rarer moments when the imposition and seduction of Western norms fail that the possibility of different conceptions of desires, politics, and subjectivities emerges."

As Sultan, the hero of Youssef Edriss's last short story, *Abu Al-Rigal* (Father of Men) shows, the crisis in male identity in the Arab world is partially self-induced (failure, cowardice), keeping in mind that the pressure of capitalism and the West remains the overriding force, the overriding engine of perversion.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/950/cu1.htm>