Queer Shahada and the Resurgence of Islamically-Mediated Desire in Twenty-First Century Life Writing

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Transnational and Comparative Literatures

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the intersection of religious faith and gender/sexual identity with a particular focus on the feminist social and academic movements of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, such as the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in 2022 and *Jineolojî* as a Kurdish 'science of women and life'. It delves into the broader implications of these feminist movements, highlighting their transethnic and transnational effects on questions of liberation for gender and sexually marginalized groups in Muslim epistemologies. The study employs a post-Islamist lens to explore how the emancipation of Muslim women can signify a broader liberation for all marginalized groups (and vice versa).

The methodology combines literary analysis, field research, and theoretical exploration across various disciplines, including autobiography studies, feminism, queer studies, and Islamic studies. It emphasizes the importance of a trauma-informed, survivor-driven approach to understanding the narratives of Muslim queer individuals. The dissertation critically examines the impact of neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, and Orientalist perspectives on Muslim queer identities, proposing a new framework for Muslim queer relationality that challenges prevailing power structures and investigates several alternative interpretations of Islamic texts from Muslim feminists.

Significant findings include the identification of shahada (witnessness) as a cultural and religious practice that fosters socio-political reform and empowerment. The work of queer Muslim authors, especially through autobiographical narratives, emerges as a potent form of

resistance and reclamation of identity, challenging the incompatibility often perceived between Islam and queer identities. The analysis of Lamya H's memoir *Hijab Butch Blue*s provides a nuanced critique of traditional Islamic exegeses, advocating for a queer Muslim theology that intertwines the personal and political in the struggle for liberation.

The dissertation concludes by situating the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and Jineolojî within a broader context of resistance against systemic oppression in the Middle East, suggesting that the intersections of gender, faith, and ethnicity offer a unique perspective on the region's socio-political dynamics. It calls for further research into the role of Muslim queer literature and its potential to inform and inspire resistance movements within and beyond the MENA region, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and intersectional approaches in addressing the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Sajad Soleymani Yazdi. No part of this dissertation has been previously published.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was completed in the course of my 6-year PhD sojourn, during which I lived and worked in amiskwacîwâskahikan, colonially known as Edmonton. I acknowledge that I am deeply indebted to the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Stoney, Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe communities on whose ancestral lands this dissertation was written. I made the final revisions on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseleil-Waututh peoples, where I currently live, in Vancouver. I acknowledge that as a settler, I have benefitted from the very systems of colonialism that I critique.

This dissertation was completed relationally: I owe my relations thanks.

From 2006, Banafsheh's love for me has been an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken.

From 1987, my parents, Fariba and Reza, have nurtured me into the person that I am.

From 1988, my brother, Saleh, has stood by my side.

From 2006, Ana has supported me despite all odds.

From 2005-2020, Ali taught me to love literature.

From 2005-2022, Masoud taught me to love Persian Literature.

From 1987-2020, my grandfather, Hassan, taught me to stand my ground.

From 2017-2024, my committee members, Professors Mojtaba Mahdavi, Marie-Eve Morin, and Daniel Laforest (supervisor), helped shape me into the scholar that I am and this dissertation into what it is today.

In February 2017, when the Trump administration put Executive Order 13769 and subsequently Executive Order 13780, both titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, into effect, the nationalities of Muslim-majority nations had their

American visas revoked. University of Alberta was among the few academic institutions that extended student application deadlines and waived applications fees to welcome students who wish to study in a more welcoming atmosphere. The people who made that decision deserve my gratitude for the completion of this dissertation.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

«از کردستان تا تهران ستم علیه زنان»

From Kurdistan to Tehran, oppression against women [reigns]!

- One of the rallying cries chanted during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran, 2022-3

The murder of Zhina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022 in Iranian Guidance Patrol (Gasht-e Ershad)[1] detention, sparked nationwide protests in Iran and resonated globally, prompting demonstrations in cities around the world. The protests, which were the largest Iran had seen since the 1979 Revolution, shortly after transformed into a freedom movement and came to be known nationally and globally by its tripartite slogan, *zan, zendegi, azadi* (woman, life, freedom),[2] a rallying cry borrowed from the Kurdish women's freedom movement, *jin, jian, azadi*.[3]

While protests against the mandatory dress code were not unprecedented – the first such demonstrations, in fact, occurred a day after the dress code was decreed by Khomeini on March 7, 1979 – this movement was most widespread, affecting rural and urban areas and people from all classes, ethnicities, and religious associations, effectively becoming a movement with grievances beyond women's emancipation.

Under the banner of "Woman, Life, Freedom," demonstrators protested a multitude of issues. These included, but were not limited to, authoritarian rule, economic hardships, high

[1] گشت ارشاد or Morality Police is a unit within the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose main objective is to perform one of the obligatory acts of Shia Islam: to enjoin what is good and to forbid what is evil.

[2] زن-زندگی-آزادی

[3] ژن، ژیان، ئازادی

unemployment rates, climate crises, religious fundamentalism, government corruption, as well as a confrontational foreign policy which had isolated Iran. As the slogan suggests, the movement also bore a significant ethnic component, particularly visible in the provinces of Kurdistan (Zhina Mahsa Amini's home) and Sistan and Baluchestan, regions long subjected to anti-Kurd and anti-Baluch ethnic discriminations. The government's violent responses, including use of live bullets and consequent large-scale killings, spurred the protests further. Young people were at the forefront of this uprising, facing severe repression from the regime. The arrest, abuse, and murder of these young protesters further fueled the momentum of the demonstrations (Wright).

The Islamic Republic effectively suppressed the movement by killing hundreds of individuals and detaining upwards of 19,000 people (Amnesty International). However, the changes the movement had already produced in Iran were irrevocable, as indicated by Iranian political historians Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (Afary and Anderson 97–8). Afary and Anderson note that by March 2023, the Iranian century-old women's rights movement had reached a point where it redefined liberation struggles; prior to this, Iranian struggles had never converged in such ubiquity around issues of gender rights, even if only in their slogans. Asef Bayat, scholar of Middle Eastern uprisings, adds that while the movement had not achieved any of its goals,[4] it signified "a paradigm shift in Iranian subjectivity—recognition

[4] From the rallying cries, it is safe to deduce that some of the common goals were:

- Safeguarding civil and political freedoms, particularly those pertaining to women.
- Bringing to justice those responsible for the death of Zhina Mahsa Amini.
- Abolishing compulsory religious mandates, such as the law requiring women to wear a hijab.
- Disbanding the Morality Police.
- Overthrowing the existing Iranian government

that the liberation of women may also bring the liberation of all other oppressed, excluded, and dejected people" (Bayat, "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?" 23).[5] I concur with Bayat that the movement brought about the collective understanding that the emancipation of women could lead to the freedom of other marginalized individuals. However, I think contextualizing this movement within Bayat's own post-Islamist formulation would raise important questions beyond "Iranian subjectivity". Additionally, a post-Islamist reading would be better equipped to raise questions about women's emancipation in such Muslim-majority countries as Iran. Vis-à-vis Bayat's notion of post-Islamism, the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement reveals more than a "paradigm shift in *Iranian* subjectivity" (my emphasis). It also signifies a broader shift in a vast array of subjectivities within Muslim-majority countries, especially with regards to gender issues within Islam.

Feminism put in dialogue with Muslim studies has introduced interesting strands of inquiry. With regards to Muslim women's emancipation it has posed questions, such as: How are Muslim women resisting nativist and exclusivist hegemonic discourses about their own rights and freedom in Islam? How are Muslim women making democratic freedom compatible with their modern Muslim subjectivities? In the context of postsecularity, how do Muslim women understand their position within society? To what extent do Muslim women rely on the Quran and other traditional Islamic texts to define freedom for themselves? How do Muslim women challenge feminism as the dominant academic system of study of, on and about women?

[5] Bayat, Asef. "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 34, no. 2, April 2023, pp. 19–31. Johns Hopkins University Press, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0019.

Returning to the origin of the slogan, "woman, life, freedom,"[6] a woman-centred school of thought that has recently emerged from the Middle East is *Jineoljî*. Deriving its name from the common Kurdish root word for *jin* (woman) and *jian* (life) and the Greek suffix of logos, Jineoljî signifies the 'science of woman and life' (Dirik 77). Conceived in 2008 within Abdullah Öcalan's[7] *Sociology of Freedom*, it seeks to radically and "glocally"[8] re-envision traditional academic approaches to women and women-centred studies, particularly challenging the Eurocentric, male-dominated, and positivist nature of social sciences. A prominent proponent of Jineolojî, Dilar Dirik presents the concept as a women's science that "encompasses also feminism … [which] seeks solutions to global social issues towards liberation" (77). It is not characterized as antagonistic or "an alternative to feminism" but rather one that incorporates and builds upon women's struggles and knowledges historically to develop a "science" in the true sense of the term, with its own epistemology, ontology, and

[6] The slogan's origins are commonly attributed to chants heard during funerals led by Kurdish women for female victims of honor killings, where the phrase "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" — "Woman, Life, Freedom" — became a rallying cry for change (Zeidan).

[7] Öcalan "led the Kurdish liberation struggle as the head of the PKK from its foundation in 1978 until his abduction on 15 February 1999. He is still regarded as a leading strategist and one of the most important political representatives of the Kurdish people" (Öcalan 61). He is famous to have said that 5,000 year-long human civilization from "Sumer to Akkad, from Babylon to Assur, from Persia to Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Europe and finally the USA" is the history of the slavery of women, and that woman's freedom will only be achieved by waging a struggle against the foundations of this ruling system" (9). In fact, he goes beyond that to assert that all emancipatory struggles are doomed to fail unless women's emancipatory struggle succeeds in achieving its goals.

[8] A portmanteau of 'global' and 'local' used to refer to "the seamless integration between the local and global; the comprehensive connectedness produced by travel, business, and communications; willingness and ability to think globally and act locally" ('glocal')

methodology, and importantly one that responds to women's issues within the Middle Eastern context. Dirik points out that methodologically "Jineolojî values a diversity of approaches that can transcend the object/subject dichotomy rooted in much of Western intellectual thought, and holistically account for emotions, experiences, intuitions, notions of truth relating to *al-ma'nawi* (Arabic: the non-materialist, the spiritual, and impalpable) beyond the realm of the quantifiable, testable, or measurable" (79). For example, she notes that jineolojists visit various villages, actively engaging in understanding and appreciating the often-disregarded wisdom of women, particularly those insights deemed irrelevant or insignificant in mainstream contexts: The traditional knowledge possessed by rural women, such as their grasp of herbal remedies and cycles of nature, is not only acknowledged but also serves as a basis for deeper reflections on the significance and function of knowledge in fostering human connections and community life (80). Importantly, drawing from its deep roots in nearly fifty years of mass organizing, Jineolojî scrutinizes the often complex and inaccessible language of feminist and queer theories. It highlights the risk of these disciplines losing touch with their radical origins and becoming institutionalized through governmental, financial, bureaucratic, and gatekeeping influences.

In dialogue with feminism, this Middle Eastern 'science of woman and life' offers a nuanced contribution to both feminism and Muslim studies, as it problematizes both Feminism as the hegemonic mode of study of women and the patriarchy of the Muslim culture whence Jineolojî sprang. Its methodology, which encompasses diverse approaches beyond the traditional Western academic framework, provides an understanding of Middle Eastern women's experiences, integrating emotional, spiritual, and experiential aspects often overlooked in mainstream feminist discourse. This perspective is vital in examining the

dynamics of women's rights and freedom within the intricate socio-cultural and religious fabrics of these societies. By emphasizing the value of local knowledge and grassroots movements, Jineolojî's calls for political shifts in gender discourse inspired political action as seen in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement in Iran. Its focus on developing a science of women and life, rooted in the realities of the Middle East, offers a powerful tool for exploring and addressing the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in their struggle for liberation.

In synthesizing deliberations on feminism, Muslim Studies, and queer theory, throughout this dissertation, it becomes evident that the journey toward Muslim women's emancipation is intricately interwoven with a wider discourse of marginalized identities and liberation theories, in the MENA region. Scholars are correct in pointing out that the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement has cultivated an awareness of how women's empowerment could extend to other marginalized groups. However, the reverse is equally true. In this dissertation, I investigate how marginalized identities could also enhance efforts toward women's emancipation. Importantly, the liberatory vitality of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement did not merely reside in its localized inception but significantly in its ability to traverse boundaries; the movement after all was inspired by the activism of Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian Kurds. As suggested by Michael Hardt, the movement's capacity to travel, to cross-pollinate with analogous struggles and ideas enriches and complexifies the discourse on women's liberation. In addition, Middle Eastern women struggle against several intersections of violence. For instance, Zhina Mahsa Amini was not only targeted because of not observing the dress code reserved for people of her gender identity, but her ethnicity as a Kurd, her lower middle-class status, her secular Sunnism (against the hegemonic state-endorsed Shiite fundamentalism) made her more susceptible to the violence which killed her. One ought to

avoid misleading gender-only, race-only, class-only (and other such single-axis) analyses in favour of a more holistic approach that would recognize the intersectional violence faced by women of the MENA region.

In this dissertation, I study how LGBTQIA+ movements in Muslim contexts can contribute to Muslim women liberatory movements. The integrative dialogue with queer Muslim theology, particularly that which is trauma-informed and survivor-driven, emerges as a poignant conduit through which Muslim women, especially those identifying as queer, are not only redefining freedom but are actively participating in a re-imagination and re-articulation of Islam to inclusively address women's rights. The memoirs of queer Muslim women, dissected as such, render a deeply personal yet universally resonant narrative of democratic freedom. It is within these personal and collective quests for defining freedom, undergirded by an intersectional understanding of gender, sexuality, and religious observation, that a potentially transformative discourse on Muslim women's emancipation is being carved. This dissertation posits that a multi-faceted, inclusive, and transboundary approach to Muslim queer theology not only significantly contributes to but is in fact instrumental in advancing a more egalitarian, just, and humane understanding of Muslim women's emancipation.

In the next chapter, I will first begin by asking how democratic freedom is formulated within Muslim-majority countries, especially, Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) nations. I will provide a cursory overview of the two most prominent perspectives on freedom and democracy in Muslim-majority nations. On the one hand, there is the view that holds that democracy is essentially incompatible with Islam, or its flipside that holds Islam is intrinsically democratic. On the other hand, another perspective challenges the premise of questioning the compatibility between democracy and Islam; it suggests a rephrasing of the

question to investigate ways democracy and Islam *can become* compatible. Examining this post-Islamist view can yield insights when positioned beside the discourse of postsecularity, as I will succinctly illustrate through the pioneering contributions of Jürgen Habermas, Jose Casanova, and Charles Taylor. Using this post-Islamist, postsecular context, I will then turn to the question: What does democracy mean for women in the MENA region and Muslim women globally? Here, I will focus on Islamic feminism distinguishing them from the works of Muslim feminists; I show how the former uses scriptural and the latter uses non-scriptural means to study Muslim women emancipation. Next, to demonstrate how queer theory can contribute to this conversation, I will outline the field of queer theology to demonstrate what a Muslim queer theology can look like and how it can contribute to the mentioned paradigms. Ultimately, the aim of this study is to centralize trauma-informed and survivor-driven approaches within the discourse of Muslim women emancipation.

In the third chapter, I will centralize the discussion on the question why queer Muslims prefer autobiographies as their preferred mode of expression. I will explore the concept of shahada, which I argue is not only one of the pillars of Islam, but also a mode of relationality indigenous to Muslim cultures, the basis upon which Muslims enact social reform, and a state of being a perpetual witness for the sake of others. Through a literary lens, this chapter propounds a radical theory of shahada as a catalyst for socio-political reform, fostering freedom and equality through religiously-infused literature. Drawing insights from Ali Shariati, I interpret Muslim testimonial literature as part of a tradition of Muslim Witnessness, which is a cultural, non-violent endeavor Muslims leverage to raise social consciousness resonating with a form of civil mysticism, aligning theory with praxis for resistance against the status quo. To develop the notion of shahada, I use Robert Harvey's notion of Witnessness,

which he argues is a form of being a witness vicariously as readers, and through a form of empathy. The chapter further juxtaposes Shariati's and Asef Bayat's philosophies, both underscoring the emancipation and agency of individuals within a collective during oppressive times, advocating for an active citizenry geared towards social responsibility. Through this exploration, the chapter delineates a framework intertwining literary discourse, Islamic theology, and socio-political activism, aiming for a robust understanding of Muslim emancipatory narratives.

In the fourth chapter, using a Foucauldian analysis of desire, I ask: How can queer Muslim desire critique the neoliberalist status quo? Learning from Critical Indigenous Studies, I explore the potentials and risks of using subjectless critique for Muslim studies, introducing Muslim queer relationality, which I argue has the potential of shedding light on power dynamics for the queer Muslim diaspora in North America. Examining the narratives of these marginalized groups, I aim to show how they resist the normativities perpetuated by resolutely homonormative and heteronormative colonialist discourses, advocating for a shift towards a relational understanding that honors the agencies, relations, and embodied narratives of queer Muslims. Through an examination of literary works and historical interpretations, alongside the critique of existing theoretical frameworks, I seek to foster a new understanding of identity, power, and resistance in the emerging field of Critical Queer Muslim Studies. I propose a trauma-informed and survivor-driven approach to explore the political and legal resurgence of these communities, highlighting the potential for transformative change through a critique of Neoliberalism. Lastly, I emphasize the pivotal role of queer Muslim life writings in understanding and reconstituting Muslim selfhood for the present, veering away from

strictly scriptural interpretations towards an acknowledgment of current queer Muslim practices, relations, and experiences.

In the fifth chapter, I read *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H to show what a trauma-informed reinterpretation of the Quran can look like within the larger framework of a "post-foundationalist" approach towards Muslim feminism, as envisioned by Raja Rhouni. This memoir acts as a vessel where the strands of trauma, gender non-conformity, and Islamic spirituality meld, thereby offering a praxis-oriented *tafsir* that diverges from traditional exegeses which often marginalize non-normative gender identities. By navigating the liminal space of being a queer Muslim, Lamya H orchestrates a narrative that is at once a personal odyssey and a socio-cultural critique, fostering a dialectic between the lived experiences of gender-diverse individuals and the often rigid, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts. Structured in chapters, imitating the structure of the Quran, *Hijab Butch Blues* takes its title from Leslie Feinberg's now-canonical *Stone Butch Blues*, a historical novel which accounts its protagonist Jess Goldberg's tumultuous journey through gender confusion, societal oppression, and eventual self-acceptance. In doing so, *Hijab Butch Blues* deconstructs and re-envisions Quranic exegesis, not as a rigid monolith, but as a living discourse capable of engaging with the embodied realities and traumas of gender-diverse Muslim individuals. It aligns with Rhouni's advocacy for a post-foundationalist approach that navigates beyond the essentialist interpretations of the Quran, thereby opening avenues for a more nuanced, justice-oriented Islamic theology: a queer Muslim theology.

Chapter 2. Defining Azadi through a Post-Foundationalist Muslim Queer Epistemology

Azadi: What does Freedom mean?

In various languages across Eastern Europe, Western Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, from Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Persian, to Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali, one of the main terms for freedom is *azadi*. According to Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani, one of the most prolific and esteemed literary critics of Persianate literatures, azadi has not always indicated freedom in the democratic sense; he writes that "traditionally, the term was used most often dichotomously against slavery and bondage" (Shafiei Kadkani 43). Of interest, Shafiei Kadkani notes, is that Sufi poets, such as Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr, understood the term as a paradox: "They perceived the pinnacle of freedom in complete devotion and submission to the Supreme Divine" (43). Shafiei Kadkani considers this conception of freedom as the common traditional understanding of the term azadi until the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905–1911). Freedom from bondage, but also paradoxically, freedom in bondage (of the beloved, sometimes God) thereafter transformed into democratic freedom or freedom from totalitarianism. In other words, Kadkani implies that individualistic spiritual freedom transformed into a collective political freedom. As he shows, during the events that led to the Constitutional Revolution, politically active poets, such as Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi (1889–1939) and Mohammad Taqi Bahar (1886–1951), attempted to align the concept of azadi with its Western equivalents (in this case, French *liberté*) to signify *democratic* freedom. For instance, in a poem, Farrokhi Yazdi demonstrates how tyranny and freedom are in binary opposition, thereby effectively modernizing the term: "Between the captain of tyranny and the god of freedom / Tempests come to life and rage, / Battles brew a thrilling stage" (line 4).[9] He

[9] All translations from Farsi to English are mine unless otherwise noted. The original poem reads:
در میان طوفان زای، مرد و در جنگ است

politicizes the concept by employing freedom in binary opposition to tyranny rather than bondage. Moreover, cognizant of azadi's traditional definition – opposition to bondage and slavery – Farrokhi Yazdi subtly yet forcefully employs the term to equate life under pre-Constitutional Qajar rule to slavery.

Kadkani's commentary on the shifts in the concept of azadi is part of a lengthy monograph (first published in 2012) on the developmental sources of Modern Persian poetry (from the late 19th century to the present). In the book, he correctly argues that the modernization of Persian society was forced through the imperial powers of British and Russian Empires and the iron fist of Reza Shah; this colonially-mediated modernity led to new paradoxes, he argues. For instance, while in the past azadi was paradoxically used in Sufi discourse to signify total submission to God, Kadkani believes that after the Constitutional revolution new paradoxes arose by the Westernized reconstitution of the concept of azadi for a society deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. He then proceeds with a proclamation that is not entirely relevant to the topic he is discussing – a digression that is surprising given his sombrely focussed style of writing. He proclaims that azadi in its modern sense, meaning democratic freedom, is essentially infeasible in Muslim-majority nations, such as Iran, since Islam and democratic freedom are essentially incompatible; they are a union of opposites, he says:

> "The truth is that Western democracy is fundamentally based on humanism, and without the exercise of these humanistic principles, it is indeed impossible to see a true embodiment of democracy in society. Given that established interpretations of Islam do not accommodate

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ناخدای استبداد با خدای آزادی

Of interest is that this verse has been recently popularized during the ceremonies of the Mourning of Muharram in Iran, a rare show of dissent against the Islamist government from within traditional Islamic groups.

> notions of humanism, it is necessary to acknowledge that freedom, as understood in democratic terms, cannot find a place in Islam. Perhaps this could change if we propose a fresh interpretation of Islam, one that establishes a relationship with the concept of humanism, which might even be necessary. However, until such an interpretation gains acceptance among the intellectual leaders of the religious community, we must concede that freedom, in the democratic sense, is incompatible with Islam". (44-5)

For the brevity with which he deals with the issue, it would not be productive here to delve into Kadkani's interpretation of the relation between Islam and humanism, his delineation of the centrality of humanism to democracy, nor the significance he assigns to "intellectual leaders of the religious community" in the passage quoted above. For the purposes of this study, however, it is important to contextualize this assertion.

A group of scholars hold that Muslim politics and societies are uniquely different from those of the rest of the world. One pole of this group argues that Islam is essentially incompatible with democracy, and the other argues that Islam is inherently democratic. The latter mainly relies on the Quranic verse (42:38) which translates to Muslims "conduct their affairs by mutual consultation," the Islamic principles of consensus (*ijmaa'*), and/or independent reasoning (*ijtihad*).[10] This subgroup requires attention in their essentialist approach to Islam; and I will discuss them later in the discussion. The other

[10] Interestingly, Kadkani argues for both cases; he writes, "It is only fair to remind the reader that among the first generation of Muslims and during the reign of the first four Muslim Caliphs, democracy, in this sense, was implemented to some extent" (44).
For one understanding of this idea see Esposito, "Contemporary Islam: Reformation or Revolution" in *The Oxford History of Islam* (677–80).

, on the other hand, the subgroup Bayat calls "skeptics" ("Islam and Democracy: What Is the Real Question?" 8), is crucial to explore in more depth, as they yield significant influence within academic discourse on/about Islamic societies.

Edward Said has informed us that this interpretation is nothing new; it is a key characteristic of Orientalism, a discourse initiated by European elites in the 18th century, a hallmark of modern colonialism. While it may seem that Said's study of Orientalism (1978) might have dissuaded scholars from embracing this nativist, traditionalist, and essentialist idea of Muslim societies outright, yet by the 1990s, the idea that Muslims are generally *different*, for whom democratic freedom is essentially infeasible, resonated among such Orientalists as Ernest Gellner, Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, among others (Matin-Asgari). After 09.11.2001 and the ensuing US War on Terror campaign, this idea resonated with many. The newest and perhaps most popular iteration is Shadi Hamid's 2016 book, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, *how the struggle over Islam is reshaping the world.* In this accessible yet erudite monograph, the idea of Islam-vs-democracy is more nuanced than the ones held by Kadkani or other mentioned Orientalists. The point Hamid makes is not so much that Islam is inherently resistant to democracy, but that its relationship with politics and governance is distinct and inherently different from other religions, which makes it exceptionally resistant to secularization. This form of 'Islamic exceptionalism,' is "neither good nor bad," he argues; rather, due to Islam's distinct origin and evolution, it sets it apart from other religions (5). Therefore, he reasons that it is unrealistic to expect Islam to follow the Western model, where religion was assumedly and gradually relegated to the private sphere following the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment. Further, according to Hamid, a democratic process in a

Muslim society seldom results in a society that is free and liberal in the Western sense. Rather, it could lead to a deeper integration of Islam into public life.

Hamid's delineation of Islamic exceptionalism – the reasons why Islam is essentially different from other religions – hinges on two essential factors both related to the founding moment of Islam: the centrality of Prophet Mohammad to Islam, and the nature of its principal scripture, the Quran. Firstly, Hamid points towards the multifaceted character of Prophet Mohammad: "[He] was a theologian, a politician, a warrior, a preacher, and a merchant, all at once. Importantly, he was also the builder of a new state" (78). This versatility was reflected in *The Quran*, Hamid writes, a text which speaks to issues of governance, law, and socio-political conditions of its era. By underscoring the interconnectedness of religion and politics in Islam, Hamid brings into relief the contrast with Christianity, where Jesus Christ acted as a state dissenter rather than ruler or lawmaker. The second pillar of his argument concerns *The Quran*, which he asserts Muslims believe as not only "divinely inspired but [what] is God's actual direct and literal speech. As a foundational tenet of Islam, on which so many other tenets depend, it is difficult to overstate the centrality of divine authorship and how it affects the interpretation and practical application of Islam" (90). Hamid maintains that these two founding moments of Islam – Mohammad as role model, and *The Quran* as foundational – present obstacles for secularist movements within Muslim-majority regions, as it is challenging to dispute them and persuade believers of their incompatibility with modernity, especially since Islamic law is based on the two in many Muslim-majority states.

Scholars have raised several issues against both hard and soft iterations of such Islamic exceptionalism, as mentioned above. Islamic exceptionalism, or variously termed Muslim exceptionalism and/or MENA exceptionalism, often adopts an essentialist lens to understand

Islam, Muslims, or cultures of the MENA region. First, Islam is a non-monolithic religion, meaning that Islam is not uniform or homogeneous; there is significant diversity within the Islamic faith, including different cultural practices, varying interpretations of religious texts, and distinct theological or jurisprudential schools of thought. Second, the people who are Muslim at birth are of several genders and sexualities, ethnicities and races, with varying degrees of religiosity and/or religious observances, of different social classes, all with different, sometimes opposing, interpretations of Islam. Thirdly, MENA cultures have developed organically through history; like any other culture, there is nothing intrinsic in the culture of the MENA region. The nebulous borders of Islam, Muslim identity, and cultures of the MENA region have been ever-shifting under the impact of economic, political, and sociological factors. In short, religion has not been the *only* contributing factor to their development.

Put simply, the founding moments of Islam are not its defining moments, as Hamid and others would like us to believe. Attempting to study a historically formed and continuously evolving idea, such as Islam and Muslim societies, as if they were static, is elusive. Further, this essentialist pursuit for origins is misleading in that it pretends that the status quo is a continuation of an unbroken procession of events, which may be traced linearly to an origin – the essential cause of the current state of affair. According to Foucault, the first illusion that a search for origins conjures is the mirage that it is possible "to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities." "This search," he continues, "assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 142). Secondly, Foucault adds that "the origin is no more than 'a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief

that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth" (143). In sum, the most fundamental criticism against exceptionalist perspectives towards Islam and Muslim societies is that they are based on super-imposed and essentialist interpretations of a religion, peoples, and cultures that resist being pinned down to an essence, which Hamid believes is the figure-head of Mohammad or the centrality of a scripture.

Furthermore, Mojtaba Mahdavi identifies five other shortcomings in the argument of *Islamic Exceptionalism* by Hamid. First, he believes that Hamid's argument does not adequately consider the realities on the ground in the MENA region. Mahdavi points to the fact that the demands made by protesters during events like the 2009 Iran's Green Movement, the Arab Spring (c. 2010), and the 2013 Gezi Park in Turkey were "absolutely devoid of a single reference to concepts/ideals such as the caliphate and/or the Islamic state" ("Whither Post-Islamism: Revisiting the Discourse/Movement After the Arab Spring" 21). Second, he criticizes Hamid's analysis for being disconnected from historical and geopolitical contexts, particularly in the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), where Hamid overstates the abstract historical idea of the caliphate as the original cause of the cult's founding and fails to consider the profound impacts of "the American-led invasion of Iraq and the failure of post-invasion state-building" on the rise of ISIS (22). Third, he considers that Hamid overemphasizes the role of Islam in defining identity and driving socio-political actions in the region, ignoring other significant factors like class, gender, race/ethnicity, and age, as well as religious and non-religious cultural traditions. Mahdavi correctly points out that "the overwhelming majority of citizens in Muslim-majority states are not Islamists" (22). Fourth, with regards to Hamid's emphasis on the distinct religious and political origins of Islam, which have given rise to ISIS, Mahdavi argues that the Islamic State is a modern "postcolonial

invention," a phenomenon with little divine justification in Islamic tradition (22). Fifth, in reference to Hamid's dichotomy between the Muslim world and the West, basing differences solely on the religion of Islam, Mahdavi points out that for Hamid "all the 'difference' between Muslims and the West boils down to one word: 'Islam' (22). He argues that this perspective is ahistorical, it essentializes secularism as a progressive democratic phenomenon, and undermines the impact of autocratic secular modernization in postcolonial MENA. Lastly, Mahdavi asserts that Hamid's argument does not account for the concept of post-Islamism, a socio-historical transformation in MENA societies that rejects both the universalism of colonial modernity and the cultural essentialism of Islamism. He believes the concept of Post-Islamism better captures the complexities of the MENA region.

Post-Islamist Democratic Freedom

Asef Bayat coined the term "post-Islamism" in 1995 to indicate a sociopolitical *condition* and *project* overcoming Islamist-ruled countries and Muslim-majority nations. The condition of post-Islamism is one through which he observes how Islamist states come to recognize the inadequacies of their Islamism. He first used this concept to describe the sociopolitical conditions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in which, "following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters" ("The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society" 45). Since then, the concept has been used to describe the post-Islamist conditions of several other Muslim-majority nations too, such as Turkey's Justice and Development Party's (AKP) approach to governance under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, especially in the 2000s and 2010s (Bokhari &

Senzai)[11] and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring (al-Anani 2015)[12] among others. Bayat argues that as Islamists try to regularize and establish their governance, they start recognizing its flaws and shortcomings. This ongoing process of adjustment and rectification makes the system prone to inquiry and skepticism. Over time, practical measures to sustain the system, lead to the abandonment of some original and fundamental principles. As such, Islamism is forced to transform itself due to both internal inconsistencies and external societal pressure. However, this metamorphosis entails a significant change in the nature of the Islamist state, one which Bayat describes as the condition of Post-Islamism. An example that Bayat often uses to describe the real-life effects of Post-Islamism, is when an Iranian diplomat made the announcement, "we don't mind destroying mosques in order to build freeways," indicating that for a greater cause – building the Islamic Republic – it is necessary to spare certain Islamic ideals. It is important to note that for Bayat "Post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic," nor does he intend to signal to the beginning of an end to Islamism (45). This is an analytical category, not a historical one, he writes.

In addition to a condition, Bayat believes post-Islamism is also a project which "represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights

[11] Bokhari, K., Senzai, F. (2013). "Post-Islamism: The Case of Turkey's AKP." In: *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization*. Middle East Today. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137313492_10

[12] al-Anani, Khalil. "Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2015, pp. 527–43. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43698286. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.

instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have called an 'alternative modernity'" (Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* 312). Therefore, for Bayat the question of whether democracy and Islam are compatible is misleading; rather, he reformulates the question to explore the conditions by which Muslims are making them compatible ("Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?" 10). As such, the project of Post-Islamism is not prescriptive; rather, it is meant to help understand the transformations that are taking place in societies with Muslim majority as well as the changes in Muslim subjectivities.

Postsecular Society

Currently, the comprehension of post-Islamism is inextricably intertwined with the concept of post-secularity. Postsecularity refers "to the persistence, reformulation, or resurgence of religion in the public sphere" (Beaumont and Eder 7). Three intellectual conceptualizations of post-secularity have provided the interrelated bases for the concept. José Casanova's work on the public role of religion in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) provided the initial groundwork for reconsidering the relation between secularization and religion within the context of modernity. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) is a pivotal critique of secularism, highlighting a cultural context where religious and secular beliefs coexist equally. The term "postsecular" first gained traction largely due to a debate between Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), and subsequently Habermas's views on the rise of post-secular society in his article "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes On Post-Secular Society" (2008). These works are thought to form the foundational ideas of postsecularity.

Jose Casanova laid the groundwork for the study of the postsecular by arguing that religions have forcefully stepped into public life and are challenging dominant societal forces, reshaping our understanding of modern values and morality, especially as they relate to secularity. This forceful re-entry of religion into public life, as he observes in the countries of Brazil, Spain, Poland, and the United States, is what he calls the "deprivatization" of modern religion. By using this term, he examines "the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them" (5). He explores diverse instances where religious traditions are not just content with individual spiritual guidance but are actively challenging prevailing political and societal structures, especially questioning the supposed neutrality of entities like markets, the same neutrality that had been the force behind privatized religion in the first place.

Casanova's critique of secularity is not without its shortcomings. In 2009, he goes as far as to compare Christianity with Islam in terms of their past and present entanglements with secularism. He argues that in the nineteenth century, American Catholicism faced skepticism and was perceived as incompatible with democratic values, a situation that closely resembles the current apprehensions surrounding Islam. History demonstrates, Casanova adds, that American Catholicism underwent significant transformations and influenced global Catholicism profoundly. Similarly, there is no inherent reason, he suggests, which prevent Muslim communities from experiencing comparable developments and evolutions ("Nativism and the Politics of Gender in Catholicism and Islam" 22).[13] Besides the fact, that this claim is

[13] The idea is reiterated throughout the article, but especially in this passage: "Every incrimination of Islam as a fundamentalist, antimodern, and anti-Western religion could have been directed justifiably

playing with a teleological version of history, it makes a comparison that is hardly neutral. As After all, comparison is never devoid of inherent biases and presuppositions (See for instance, Radhakrishnan's "Why Compare?"). From the perspective of Comparative Literature, Casanova's argument reveals a normative stance, seemingly positing American Catholicism as a paradigmatic ideal towards which Islam ostensibly aspires or *should* conform. This comparative framing implicitly constructs a hierarchical dichotomy, wherein American Catholicism is valorized as a superior reference point, potentially reducing Islamic traditions to a monolithic entity in deterministic need of evolution or reformation to align with perceived superior, American mores. Regardless, Casanova's point is taken: Politically, religions across the world resist privatization as the model for a secular modern present.

In *A Secular Age,* Charles Taylor studies the transformation of secularization, elucidating its complex interplay with religion and offering initial insights into the nascent concept of post-secularity. He portrays the transition to a secular age as a journey through "deeply cross-pressured" terrains (727), where remnants of religious life coexist, almost schizophrenically, with the relentless pursuit of spiritual meaning within what he calls an "immanent frame" – a space wherein individuals interpret and navigate their reality, focusing predominantly on the tangible and observable, or the *immanent*, potentially excluding the transcendent (542). Taylor asserts that "our age is very far from settling into a comfortable

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against Catholicism not long ago. Moreover, most features of contemporary political Islam that Western observers find so reprehensible, including the terrorist methods and the justification of revolutionary violence as an appropriate instrument in the pursuit of political power, as well as legal structures subjecting women to a double standard of sexual morality, can be found in the not-too-distant past of many Western countries and of many modern, secular movements. Thus, before attributing these reprehensible phenomena all too hastily to Islamic civilization, one should perhaps consider the possibility that global modernity itself somehow generates such practices" (22).

unbelief" (727), claiming that there are enduring tensions between belief and unbelief, the sacred and the profane, and the transcendental and the immanent. Clearly, there exist shortcomings in this line of reasoning, particularly in his numerous assertions that border on the prophetic. In one instance, he declares that "the heavy concentration of the atmosphere of immanence will intensify a sense of living in a 'waste land'," adding that next generation's young people will invariably "begin again to explore beyond the boundaries" of secularity (770). Still, the book laid the foundational stones for more nuanced analyses of the post-secular.

An exchange of ideas on secular society between Ratzinger, who was then Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and shortly after began his papacy, and Habermas continued the conversation around what constitutes a secular society, and by extension a post-secular society.[14] The debate centred around one main question raised by Ratzinger: "Is the liberal Western concept of the relation between religion and politics truly the model for the future?" (251). In other words, he asks: can the democratic constitutional state justify its pre-political normative presuppositions without appealing to religious or metaphysical foundations? I will not dwell on Ratzinger's response to his own question as it will not meaningfully contribute to this argument; however, his conclusion provides the right segue to discuss Habermas's notion of a postsecular society. Ratzinger concludes his "Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic" by advocating for a "necessary correlativity of reason and faith" (267), where both are seen as essential to each other,

[14] Their debate has been published in various volumes, most famously, *The Dialectics of Secularization* (2006). I use Anh Nguyen's translations from the edited volume, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan.

requiring mutual "purification" and "healing," and emphasizing the importance of interculturality and dialogue between the Christian faith and Western secular rationality in addressing the moral foundations of a free republic.

Habermas responds to Ratzinger by rephrasing a similar question German scholar of law Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde (1930–2019) had asked in the sixties: "Is the liberal secular state nourished by normative preconditions that it cannot itself guarantee?" ("On the Relations Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion" 251). Habermas explores the delicate balance between secular liberal states and religion, contemplating the state's dependency on normative underpinnings. He questions whether the secular state can uphold its normative foundations without the support of religious or ethical traditions, emphasizing that there exists tension between the state's ideological neutrality and its potential reliance on religious traditions. Habermas accentuates the crucial role of democratic processes and human rights in legitimizing state authority, maintaining that the liberal state should autonomously secure its legitimization from arguments detached from religious and metaphysical traditions. He writes, "Political liberalism... understands itself to be a nonreligious and postmetaphysical justification of the normative foundations of the democratic constitutional state" (251). However, in the last section of the article, he admits that secularization of society faces challenges, namely the persistence of religion, and that a mutual learning process is essential for both secular and religious citizens. Therefore, he employs the term "post-secular society" to characterize a society where religion continues to be influential in an increasingly secular environment. He notes that "post-secular" goes beyond simply recognizing the practical roles that religious communities have in molding and sustaining desired motives and attitudes. It

also encompasses acknowledging the continuous impact and relevance of religious traditions, values, and norms in public discourse and societal interactions (258).

Following this, in his influential "Notes on a Post-Secular Society," Habermas elaborates that society today is engaged in a form of tug-of-war, or "*Kulturkampf*," where multiculturalists are pushing for a legal system that's unbiased and inclusive of diverse cultural identities, warning against the dangers of enforced assimilation that could potentially erode these identities (25). On the flip side, secularists are striving for an inclusive society where cultural and religious backgrounds are a non-issue, advocating for the privatization of religion (26). In this post-secular society, both ideologies paradoxically claim to be the torchbearers of liberal values but are constantly at loggerheads. Habermas emphasizes the necessity for a harmonious balance between shared citizenship and cultural diversity in such a society. He argues that in a post-secular society, secular states should acknowledge and value the inputs of religious communities (27). He insists, "both sides, each from its own viewpoint, must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge that enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner" (28). This implies that in a post-secular society, secular citizens should approach their religious counterparts as equals.

While Habermas's implicit emphasis on the liberal state's ideological neutrality raises critical questions regarding its potential to obscure inherent power dynamics and normative biases, potentially reinforcing existing hierarchies, especially with regards to his unbalanced comparison between "multiculturalists" and "secularists," alongside Charles Taylor's and Jose Casanova's works, it provided the grounds for later studies in the relation between secularism, religion, and society. In sum, post-secularity refers to the enduring and transformative

presence of religion in the public sphere of modern societies, challenging the boundaries between the secular and the religious.

In this context, post-secularity provides a framework to better understand post-Islamism, while setting the stage for my further discussions on its implications and challenges in various fields, notably the relations between feminism, democracy and religion.

Postsecular Feminism

In her 2008 article "Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Time," Judith Butler examines various controversies related to how western democracies address otherness, attributing them to the influence of secular ideologies or "certain secular conceptions of history" (3). She explores a range of issues including then Netherland's racist immigration laws, France's anti-LGBTQ+ adoption laws, and US military interventions instances of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Butler argues that these are reflective of the pervasive impact of secularism as an ideology. She particularly critiques a document titled "The Arab Mind," assigned by the US Department of Defense in 1973, which stereotyped Arab people's religious beliefs and vulnerabilities and was later linked to the Abu Ghraib scandal. Butler's analysis of this document reveals how secular ideologies, under the guise of civilization, justified the dehumanization and torture of Muslim detainees.

Rosi Braidotti, in "The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," takes on this challenge in another way, by interposing postsecularity with feminist theory, and exploring how through this relation, the former can reshape our understanding of political subjectivity and critical theory. First, she questions the extent to which European modernism is autonomously secular. She writes, "If we can understand humanism as the respect for human rights and the modern notion of equality and democracy, which lie at the core of European modernity and drive the

emancipatory project of the Enlightenment, then it could be argued that the value system of European secular humanism is implicitly religious, albeit by negation" (8). This is the basis for her argument of "residual spirituality" at the core of critical theory. She challenges the conventional *negative* association of critical theory with "oppositional consciousness," a consciousness which she defines as a transformative awareness, arising in response to negative experiences, like oppression that entails resistance; an example she provides is the poetry of Audre Lorde. Oppositional consciousness is that which "triggers and at the same time is engendered by the process of resistance" (15). She advocates instead for a practice of identifying (or disidentification of) oppositional consciousness as affirmation, where the residual forms of spirituality at the heart of such "oppositional consciousness" in critical theory can be seen as transformative. Braidotti reinterprets oppositional consciousness as a creative and affirmative force capable of exploring new social horizons and fostering sustainable futures, in which spirituality may coexist, and in fact, enrich the secular fabric of modernity. Therefore, she argues that the postsecular turn is a transformative process, emphasizing "the creative potential of social phenomena that may appear negative at first" (14).

Braidotti's work is pivotal in redefining political subjectivity, emphasizing the importance of disidentification from negative yet paradoxically familiar experiences in post-structuralist feminism. She contends that such dis-identification is liberating yet can induce fear and insecurity as a result of the loss of habitual thoughts and representations. Braidotti concludes that this approach can lead to the creation of "new creative alternatives and sustainable futures," emphasizing the importance of an ethics of *becoming* in the postsecular turn in feminist theory (19).

Braidotti cites Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* (2004) to exemplify a form of thought that compels a re-evaluation of European feminism, a work which she believes demonstrates that political agency and subjectivity can be intertwined with and bolstered by religious devotion and spirituality, arguing that such agency doesn't necessarily have to be oppositional or solely focused on creating counter-subjectivities. In *Politics of Piety,* Mahmood used ethnographical evidence from the *da'wa*/piety movement[15] to develop a theory that the women in this movement exercise a form of agency that is not oppositional but is deeply entwined with their religious commitments, revealing the limitations of secular liberal frameworks in understanding the diverse expressions of subjectivity and agency in non-Western and religious contexts.[16]

In the preface to the second edition (2012), Mahmood responds to two main criticisms leveled at the book since its publication. One group criticizes the book for seemingly equating the agency of women upholding patriarchal norms with those opposing such norms in the name of freedom and liberty, viewing the former as submissive and the latter as heroic. Another group have characterized her exposition of the women's piety movement as a "hermeneutical exercise" that avoids political questions. To the first criticism, she responds by

[15] Mahmood defines the Arabic term, da'wa, as "literally …'call, invitation, appeal, or summons'; in the twentieth century, the term has come to be associated with proselytization activity among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In the last fifty years, it refers primarily to those activities that urge fellow Muslims to greater piety" (201). Her study is mostly focussed on "urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival" (2).

[16] A poignant critique of the works on post-secular, especially, Butler's, Braidotti's, and Mahmood's, can be found in Rosa Vasilaki's article, "The Politics of Postsecular Feminism," in *Theory, Culture & Society,* vol. 33, no. 2.

clarifying that her intention was not to pass judgments on what is feminist or antifeminist but to explore modalities of agency beyond liberatory projects. Mahmood finds the characterization of the piety movement exemplified in the second criticism, and her analysis of it, puzzling because she indicates that most of the book reflects on the political implications and transformative potentials of the piety (da'wa) movement in the social and political fields, impacting the realization of nationalist, statist, and secular-liberal projects in the Egyptian society. Such judgments, she asserts, fail "to recognize what is at stake in my analysis of the practices of the piety movement: to lay bare a parochial and narrow conception of autonomized agency that refuses to grant legitimacy to any other form of subjectivity or criticality," beyond, she implies, secular subjectivities (xii).

Importantly for our discussion of post-Islamism, Mahmood writes, "the fact that the Egyptian uprising in 2011 did not have pronounced Islamic overtones or Islamist leadership has led a number of scholars to hastily pronounce the dawning of a new 'post-Islamist era' where the Islamic politics that dominated the Middle East over the last two decades have become irrelevant" (xvii). It appears that her notion of post-Islamism appears to be somewhat different from Bayat's, which holds that "post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular" ("Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?" 19). This is evident in the following statement she provides about post-Islamism:

> The judgment that this is a "post-Islamist" era is complicated for another reason. The term "Islamist" often enfolds within itself the assumption that those who ascribe to Islamic forms of sociability (such as the ones propagated by the da'wa movement) are opposed to democratic political and economic formations. The fact that Egyptian Muslims who exhibited signs of this sociability were an integral part of the democratic protests of 2011 casts doubt on the easy line of causality drawn between abidance by conservative social mores and the danger posed to democratic projects" (xvii).

This is while in 2005, in response to misconceptions and his own misconceptualization of post-Islamism, Bayat had underscored the importance to understand post-Islamism as

> "an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have called an "alternative modernity" ("Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?"19).

In fact, one can read *Politics of Piety* as evidence of one 'alternative modernity'. Mahmood's book is an attempt to demonstrate that unlike European modernity, Egyptian modernity is not solely fixed onto the ground of a secular modernity inherently and essentially opposed to religiosity and spirituality. After all, the piety movement started in response to the belief that religion had been progressively sidelined due to the modern frameworks of the secular state (4). It has defined itself through negation, and negation, as Braidotti succinctly put it, is still a powerful form of relation.

I am not trying to yoke by force the concept of post-Islamism onto the da'wa movement as delineated in *Piety of Politics*; I seek to convey that there is dialogue between Mahmood and Bayat, especially with regards to Middle Eastern forms of indigenous modernity. One can read Mahmood's study as shedding another light on how the changing relation between democracy and Islamic practice is transforming societies where the majority are Muslims; the book is indeed delineating how Muslims are fusing "religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty." Combined, Bayat's and Mahmood's contributions to Islamic Studies can help us trace the changes occurring in Muslim subjectivities vis-à-vis the 'unfinished project of modernity'.

(Post-)Islamist Feminism

In this scope, I move to my next topic. Following, I will provide a survey of post-Islamist feminist thought, mostly focussing on two sets of thinkers. The focus of the first group is mainly the text of the Quran, as elaborated by Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud; they are commonly called Islamic feminists (Sirri 110). The second group attempts to go beyond what they deem an essentialist focus of the former on the text of the Quran to feminist ideals of gender justice. I will discuss Raja Rhouni as representative of this stance. This group, I simply call, Muslim feminists.

A) Islamic Feminists

Islamic feminism merits scrutiny not only as a significant illustration of the post-Islamist project, but also in the way it challenges traditional interpretations of modernity and secularism, deconstructing and reconstructing the categories of religion and gender to resist oppression. By way of this, Islamic feminists aim to redefine women rights rigorously through the Quran, paving the way for an endogenous emancipation. Most scholars identify Islamic feminism as a discourse promoting gender equality and social justice within Islamic tradition (the Quran, Hadith, Sharia, etc.) (see for instance, Badran; and Moghadam). By viewing their feminist commitments as integral to their understanding of Islamic justice, Islamic feminists challenge male-dominated interpretations of Islamic sacred texts and advocate for an egalitarian reading of Islam, while maintaining their commitment to the Islamic faith. It is commonly assumed that Islamic feminism emerged from Islamic modernism, a movement that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to colonialism and Western influences (Kynsilehto). It grew alongside women's demands for greater rights and participation in society, and further expanded with the rise of political Islam. Margot Badran identifies Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Moroccan sociologist and secular feminist, as the first

Islamic feminist with the 1987 publication of her book *Le harem politique - Le Prophète et les femmes,* translated in 1992 into English as *The Veil and the Male Elite: Feminist Interpretations of Women's Rights in Islam* (9). Initially, Islamic feminists aimed to reconcile Islam with modernity, using rational, scientific, and egalitarian interpretations of Islamic texts. In the 21st century, "with the emergence of a new wave of Muslim intellectuals," this "modernist" discourse shifted into a "reformist" discourse to emphasize that while religion is constant, interpretations can change (Sirri 31). Lila Abu Lughod notes that "the new Islamic feminists who are seeking gender equality through reform of Islamic family law also lay their hope for gender equality in the prior acceptance of slavery and its current rejection" (239). Abu Lughod's comparison between the historical acceptance and current rejection of slavery and the potential for a similar trajectory for gender equality adds a significant dimension to the Islamic feminist discourse. This comparison helps one understand the Islamic feminist dilemma; the struggle for social justice and gender equality within Islamic tradition is a struggle against bonds that have gradually and historically solidified through patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, Hadith, and Sharia. The analogy of slavery and gender inequality is also key to understanding the task ahead of Islamic feminists; the move for gender equality is inevitably tied to a renewed feminist *and* Islamic understanding of women's emancipation. This renewed definition of freedom is not only about individual rights and opportunities but also about the collective reinterpretation and transformation of societal norms and religious understandings, ultimately implementing that into law.

Badran identifies Islamic feminists as a group that "fundamentally employs *Ijtihad*, which involves the use of rational thinking and independent exploration of religious texts. The core methodology of Islamic feminism is *tafsir*, the interpretation of the Quran. Islamic

feminism seeks to understand and articulate notions of gender equality and social justice within Islam, distinguishing genuine Islamic teachings from patriarchal interpretations" (324). She identifies two works as seminal to this movement: Amina Wadud's *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* and Asma Barlas's *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran.*

Amina Wadud's *Quran and Woman* (1992) offers a reinterpretation of the Quran from a woman's perspective. Wadud asserts that her goal is "to emphasize how a Quranic hermeneutics that is inclusive of female experiences and of the female voice could yield greater gender justice to Islamic thought and contribute toward the achievement of that justice in Islamic praxis" (x). She challenges the prevailing patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, arguing that they reflect the superiority of the male person as "the normative human" and this "restricts women from full consideration in the construction of ethical-spiritual and social-political postulates in Islamic thought" (xi); she contends that these interpretations have historically justified gender inequities in Islamic societies. Wadud proposes that a more inclusive, gender-balanced understanding of the Quran is possible through interpretations that are "unfettered by historical androcentric readings and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections" (xi). The book's main premise is that in Islam, a woman is fundamentally intended to be a complete human being – "primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally" – equal to anyone who acknowledges Allah as Lord, Muhammad as the prophet, and Islam as the religion (ix-x).

Similarly in *"Believing Women" in Islam* (2002), Asma Barlas holds that the humans who have interpreted the Quran historically have been men, thus, "we can certainly hear male voices and masculinist biases in exegesis" (22). To remediate this, she underscores the

egalitarian essence of Quran. She challenges patriarchal interpretations, and fouses on reading the Quran historically and "holistically, hence intratextually," emphasizing individual responsibility to discern its meanings through intellect and ijtihad, rather than accepting traditional masculinist interpretations blindly. Barlas critiques historically male-dominated interpretations of Quran that conflate the Revelation with secondary texts like *hadith*, which she believes have incorporated misogynistic beliefs into Islam through time. She argues that the Quran does not lose its authenticity with translations into other languages, asserting that the Quran is "real and knowable in all languages" (215). This becomes a useful ruse for her to question the necessity of mastering classical Arabic for Quranic interpretation, as well as implying that any reading or translation is necessarily involved in "some kind of modulation or interpretive process" (24).

Obviously, Wadud and Barlas differ in their approaches, especially with regards to their Quranic exegetical efforts, but one string that links both – in fact, a good portion of Islamic feminists too – can be summarized in this assertion by Barlas:

> "[If] we wish to ensure Muslim women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Quran that justify the abuse and degradation of women: we also need to establish the legitimacy of liberatory readings. Even if such readings do not succeed in effecting a radical change in Muslim societies, it is safe to say that no meaningful change can occur in these societies that does not derive its legitimacy from the Quran's teachings, a lesson secular Muslims everywhere are having to learn to their own detriment" (3)

This passage concisely expresses three central precepts of the Islamic feminist project: (a) The Quran is indispensable in legitimizing and driving social change in Muslim communities; (b) through 'women-friendly' *tafsir,* it is necessary to challenge traditional and historically male interpretations of the Quran that perpetuate gender inequalities; and (c) the Islamic feminist's ultimate aim is to enshrine Muslim women's rights in Islamic law.

B) Muslim Feminists

Critics of Islamic feminism contend that this approach towards *The Quran*'s gender-neutral aspects is selective. As Lana Sirri shows, these Muslim feminists find fault with Islamic feminist's engagement solely with "women unfriendly" verses of the Quran, rebuking them for cherry-picking verses to fit their egalitarian projects, instead of systematically addressing *The Quran* (50). For instance, Raja Rhouni believes Islamic feminists sometimes reinterpret verses to fit modern egalitarian views and resort to historical context when they hit a "semantic dead-end" (50). This, she believes, results in a mystifying representation of Islam. Rhouni also claims that Islamic feminism tends to be essentialist when they do assert that gender equality is foundational in the Quran. She advocates for a "post-foundationalist" approach and emphasizes equality as a component of justice rather than just a Quranic assertion. Further, Rhouni believes scholars should accept Quran's androcentric discourse when verses refuse to align with their ideals or their interpretations.

In *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques*, Rhouni emphasizes the importance of transparently stating one's assumptions and perspectives when discussing Islamic feminism. She recognizes Quran's divinity but also its complexity regarding gender. She believes that the Quran can "support two opposing perspectives" and warns against oversimplifying its stance on gender, noting the Quran has "androcentric language" (14). She critiques some Islamic feminists' methodologies, stating that they ought to move away from producing "more mystifying scholarship about Islam" and should focus on "deconstructing prevalent approaches to the Quran" (15). To distance herself from the essentialist beliefs that she identifies as Islamic feminist, Rhouni introduces two strategies. The first is that she prioritizes the "feminist" before the Islamic, with a capital "I," and proposes the term islamic feminist

(with a lowercase "i"). To emphasize an "intellectual commitment" to rejuvenating Islamic thought by reevaluating gender in Islam using both new and traditional analytical tools, she continues to use the term islamic, albeit with a lowercase "I" (271). This approach, she argues, tries to go beyond writing from a faith-based perspective and to importantly include secular (not secularist, she stresses) and non-Islamic approaches to Muslim women's issues. She underscores the idea of distancing oneself from single, uniform definitions of Islam; instead, following Talal Asad, she argues that Islam ought to be perceived as "an on-going discursive tradition" (272). Secondly, she introduces a post-foundationalist approach to islamic feminism. She explains this as such: "By 'post-foundationalism,' I refer to a critique which goes beyond the dogma of Islamic feminism that gender equality is foundational to the Quran" (272). This approach avoids essentialism, where religious texts are seen as unchanging truth repositories. Instead, it combines modern analytical tools, borrowed from feminists globally, with traditional ones, borrowed from traditional tafsir and Islamic feminists, for a more nuanced understanding. Citing the reformist Egyptian Islamic theologian Nasr Abu Zaid, she emphasizes that this is far from a rejection but an evolution of the Quran, with contextual reading into the broader social and historical contexts of the Revelation (273).

As Sirri indicates, Rhouni's supporting arguments for an Islamic feminism with a lowercase "i" in Islamic is lacking. Siri correctly points out that Rhouni, "a Moroccan scholar who operates in Morocco and not in western academia, finds a solution in a western language, English, to a problem that she encounters in an Arabic context" (30). In Arabic, there are no lowercase or uppercase letters. This leads Sirri to include language ("as a social category") within the intersectionality paradigm. I agree with Sirri that Islamic written with either a lowercase or uppercase "I" does little to expand the Arabic corpus on feminism in Islam.

However, Sirri's criticism of Rhouni should be understood through the aims of Sirri's own monograph: *Islamic Feminism, Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Islam* (2020), a comparative analysis between Islamic feminists as represented by Olfa Youssef and Muslim feminists, as represented by Kecia Ali, the former MENA-based, the latter a US citizen convert working in western academia. Sirri's comparative analysis deals with the contributions of each to the project of feminism in Islam. In this context, Sirri identifies Raja Rhouni as an anomaly, who is from the MENA region but writes as if from or even *for* western academia, a hybrid.

However, given Rhouni's aim is to de-essentialize her approach to Islam, this can be seen as an attempt to (a) destabilize dominant narratives and power structures inherent in language and representation pertaining to Islam, be they from "Orientalist Islamology" or "orthodox Muslim theologians;" and (b) reflect the ongoing "crosspollination" between local traditions and global influences, as she uses the term to refer to the interconnectedness of feminist scholarship, be they faith-based or secular (Rhouni 36).

Moreover, this is in line with Rhouni's aim to counter "foundationalist" attitudes of doing feminist work within Islam, "the postulate of Islamic feminism, which also constitutes its paradigm, that gender equality is rooted in the Quran" (18). In fact, this position commonly held by Islamic feminists, such as Asma Barlas, risks reinforcing a singular, essentialist interpretation of the Quran, potentially limiting the scope for diverse and evolving understandings of gender within the Islamic tradition. Earlier in the chapter, I touched on how this methodology forms part of the Muslim apologist approach to the Quran. In their approach to the Quran, Islamic feminists can be seen as participating in the self-Orientalizing discourse of Muslim exceptionalists; similar to those scholars and theologians, like Rashid al-

Ghanoushi, who consider Islam to be inherently democratic, Islamic feminists advocate the idea that gender equality is rooted in the Quran. This idea further perpetuates the patriarchal and androcentric interpretations (*tafsir*) of the Quran that have historically subjugated women, from which Muslim feminists seek to distance themselves.

Rhouni instead introduces a "post-foundationalist" approach to Islam, which does not shy away from "[a]ddressing the androcentric aspect of the Quranic discourse" (14). She pushes for an approach to Islam that relinquishes "the disabling assumption of considering the Quran as a normative text" (269). This attitude, she warns, risks falling "prey to foundationalism, that is, the discourse that considers the Quran as the primary text on which law is founded" (269). I believe this approach is a useful tool in having Rhouni meet her goals: namely, introducing "islamic feminism to be an active contributor to the redynamization of Islamic theology, that is, through asserting the significance of gender as an important category of thought" (268). Rhouni's claims are worth contemplating, and I believe it is possible to take one step further by examining how queer theory can add to this 'post-foundationalist' attempt to denormativize religion and religious thought. Queer theory can contribute to this conversation in ways that have not been previously considered. Its emphasis on challenging normative structures and narratives can offer a fresh lens to Islamic theology. Queer theology, which seeks to reimagine religious interpretations beyond heteronormative confines, can disrupt traditional paradigms and will help demonstrate the "significance of gender as an important category of thought" within Islam. Therefore, following, to introduce a post-Islamist queer theology, first I will briefly introduce the basic tenets of queer theology.

Toward a Muslim Queer Epistemology

A major scholar of the field of queer theology is ordained episcopal priest Patrick S Cheng, whose contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* provides a broad outline of the field, importantly for our later discussions, from the perspective of a *Christian* queer theologian. For Cheng, the genesis of queer theology is not a recent academic endeavor but deeply embedded in the Christian tradition itself, with the first serious study of queer and Christian intersections going back to 1955, especially with the publication of *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, in which Derrick Sherwin argues that "the anti-homosexual tradition in Western Christianity was actually 'erroneous' and 'defective'" (159). Cheng broadly defines queer theology as "queer talk about God," which can be either "theological reflection by, for, and about LGBTI people" or relate to "how theologians have intentionally used queer theory in their work" (159).

Cheng identifies four main strands within queer theology. One of the most prominent strands is the notion of "identity without essence." He states, "To the extent that both God and queerness are 'identities without essence', it can be said that God is queer" (160). This strand, influenced by thinkers like Marcella Althaus-Reid, emphasizes the non-essentialist, non-normative aspects of both the divine and queer theory. Another strand revolves around "transgression," where Cheng notes, "Christianity is a highly transgressive belief system" because Jesus can be seen as a 'transgressive Christ' who until death, dared "to queer, or to challenge, the status quo" (161). Cheng suggests that scholars like Robert Shore-Goss have furthered this idea, suggesting that Christianity, at its core, is about challenging and subverting societal norms. The third strand, "resisting binaries," is highlighted by Cheng's observation that despite the religious right, "Christian theological tradition has long resisted binary, either-or thinking" with the ancient ecumenical councils stating that "Jesus Christ is both fully

human and fully divine" (162). This perspective, championed by thinkers like Justin Tanis, Cheng suggests, underscores the inherent resistance to binary constructs in both queerness and Christian theology. Lastly, the strand of "social construction" is illustrated by Cheng's assertion:

> "The Christian theological tradition has long held that earthly identities—whether secular or religious—are actually not of ultimate significance, particularly from an eschatological perspective. The one identity that matters is one's incorporation into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Baptism. In this way, theology is *strangely* consistent with the social constructionist view of queer theory that challenges the 'naturalness' of one's sexual and gender identities" (163, my emphasis).

There are significant gaps in this line of argument, which is consistent with Cheng's other books, especially his *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, and Christian queer theology in general. For instance, there's exclusive focus on the Christian tradition; Islamic, Hebrew, or non-monotheistic traditions are generally excluded from the purview of queer theology. Moreover, there is limited engagement with the broader spectrum of queer theory. Patrick Cheng does frequently mention Butler and Foucault's influence on queer theory, but those have been problematized and several other aspects have been introduced. For example, while Cheng does passingly mention future needs for a deeper exploration of the intersections of race and sexuality, these are regularly left out of queer theology.

Fundamentally, as exemplified by the quotation above, demonstrating Cheng's fourth characterization of queer represents an issue for which Christian theology has been criticized since its inception: apologetics. In her book, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, Linn Tonstad identifies a common thread in queer theological discourse, namely, "apologetic strategies," which she broadly defines as "why and how Christianity and queerness become compatible – how persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans* may be included into

Christianity" (3). Tonstad argues that the argument apologists use for gender and sexual inclusion is analogous to the argument used to exclude, which is that "gender and sexuality *matter*" in Christianity (5 original emphasis). However, by briefly outlining the importance assigned to the body throughout the history of Christianity, she concludes that there exists "historical variability in the importance and significance of sex and gender" (15). In the quote above, we can observe this apologetic strategy in the qualification "strangely." This choice of wording can be seen as apologetic, because it acknowledges the distance between Christian theology and queer theory yet presents a compatibility that seems "strange." I interpret this as a defensive and conciliatory gesture towards queer, which one can trace in much Christian queer theology (see Tonstad 16–47).

Lastly, as Kent Brintnall mentions in a review of Partrick Cheng's magnum opus, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*,

> "Queer Scripture, for Cheng, is the Bible. Why not *The Well of Loneliness, Portrait of Dorian Grey, Rubyfruit Jungle, Giovanni's Room, Frisk, Stone Butch Blues, Angels in America*? Even in his discussion of queer experience, Cheng mentions only confessional accounts. What about the wide array of AIDS memoirs, coming-out narratives, pornographic novels, and pulp romances that make no explicit mention of religion? Isn't any queer work of art part of the queer tradition, testimony to queer experience – a candidate for inclusion in queer scripture?"

The major point I attempt to convey in this dissertation is that queer theology cannot be reduced to religious "canons," be they of Christian, Islamic, or other origin. My objective was to conduct a concise exploration of (Christian) queer theology, using it as a foundation to identify both its potentials and limitations. This approach will assist in developing a survivor-driven and trauma-informed queer theology rooted in Muslim testimonies. Such an exploration is crucial for establishing a framework for a distinctly Muslim queer theology, which is separate from Islamic, Islamist, or even post-Islamist perspectives.

While studies into LGBTQIA+ Muslim literature has received increasing attention in the last two decades, these studies have mostly focussed on exegeses of the Islamic canon (as demonstrated in my discussion of Islamic feminism) (also see for instance Alipour; Kugle; and Siraj), empirical analyses (see for instance, Mahomed; Shah; and Jahangir and Abdul-Latif), and historical studies (see for instance, Schmidtke; and Babayan and Najmabadi). As such, it appears that Queer Muslim Studies is predominantly confined to the realm of ethnography, limiting its scope to observational case studies. This 'ethnographic entrapment' of queer Muslim studies will be discussed in the fourth chapter, where I outline the potential of a subjectless critique of Queer Muslim Studies to go beyond the queering of Muslim studies and focus on developing theory from queer Muslim practices.

In recent years, a substantial body of creative works depicting and representing queer Muslim lives has emerged, including fictional novels (see for instance, Rabih Alameddine's *The Wrong End of the Telescope*, Omar Sakr's *Son of Sin*, and Abdellah Taïa's *A Country for Dying*), documentaries (see for instance, *Be Like Others*; *A Jihad for Love*; *Al-Nisa*), and films (see for instance, *Flee; Naz & Maalik; Signature Move;* and *L'Armée du salut*). Among the creative works named above, the preferred mode of expression among queer Muslim has been the self-exploratory genre, which one can see in personal narratives ranging from the creative nonfiction memoir to the personal documentary and from the coming-out autobiography to the self-promoting memoir. Even among fiction, such as Rabih Alameddine's fantastical novels and Abdellah Taïa's introspective autofiction, the main mode of expression remains the autobiographical.

The 21st century has witnessed a sharp rise in the publication of queer Muslim personal narratives. Among many others, the following stand out. Kazim Ali is commonly mentioned

as inspiration by many of the memoirists that followed. His work combines several genres revolving around an autobiographical narrative (See Bright Felon 2012 and Silver Road 2018). Parvez Sherpa is also a pioneer. His documentary, *A Jihad for Love,* was one of the first – if not *the* first – film to explicitly explore Islam and homosexuality. He later published an autobiography, titled, *A Sinner in Mecca* (2017). The year 2019 saw a flurry of such narratives with *Angry Queer Somali Boy* by Mohamed Abdulkarim Ali, *Love is An Ex-Country* by the celebrated author, Randa Jarrar, *Life as a Unicorn* by Amrou al-Kadhi, and the acclaimed Canadian memoir, *We Have Always Been Here* by Samra Habib, each shedding light on varied queer Muslim experiences. The trend continued in 2021 with the publication of the memoirs, *A Dutiful Boy* by Mohsin Zaidi, *Djinn* by Tofik Dibi, and *Black Boy Out of Time* by Hari Ziyad. In recent years, *In Sensorium* by Tanaïs (2022) and *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H (2023) have joined the chorus of queer Muslim voices.

Despite this rise, the field of queer Muslim autobiographical studies remains largely unexplored, with scant critical examinations dedicated to this emergent literary body. This gap in scholarly engagement presents fertile ground for academic inquiries into questions, such as: Why are Muslims choosing personal narrative as the preferred way of expressing themselves? What is queer in the queer Muslim sense? And, to return to the central question raised at the beginning of this chapter, how is the dialectic of liberation and Muslimhood articulated, negotiated, and/or problematized within these autobiographical narratives? How can these negotiations of identity and personal freedom lead to the wider discussion of collective action and democratic freedom, especially in the MENA region, where women's freedom movement as exemplified by Woman, Life, Freedom is gaining traction? In the coming chapters, this dissertation will engage with these questions.

Chapter 3. Muslim Witnessness, Or How Muslims Instigate Political Refolution through *Shahada*

> If the witness claims his deposition is only his martyrdom, / What need is there for litigation when God is his witness?
>
> -Khwaju Kermani

Introduction. Shariati's Shahada

Ali Shariati's idea of relationality may be condensed in his triad of spirituality, equality, and freedom ("*'erfan, barabari, azadi*"), which is central to how he conceives sociopolitical change is achieved in Muslim-majority nations. In this chapter, I will expand this formula to investigate how a literary understanding of the radical theory of *shahada*—a new reformulation that develops the original shahada pun (the double entendre on martyrdom/witnessing)—may instigate sociopolitical reform by promoting freedom and equality through a religiously-inspired literature. I will define the borders of this theory of shahada, delve into how as one of the five pillars of Islam, shahada(t) signifies the state of being a martyr and the state of being a witness, and problematize the issue as being frequently either solely interpreted as the state of being a martyr—the conviction to die for one's faith (*jihad*)—or solely a witness—complete surrender to whatever befalls one and one's community (*Muselmann*). Isolated, both iterations remove agency from the Muslim subject, but in tandem, they have the force to become an agent of sociopolitical reform.

I argue that shahada, what I translate as *Muslim Witnessness*, is fundamentally martyr and witness concurrently. Thinking through Ali Shariati, the Muslim revolutionary and sociologist, I take Muslim Witnessness to mean a cultural, non-violent struggle required by all Muslims to raise Muslim consciousness about their positions in society ~~through~~. To this I add that such struggle is primarily literary. For Shariati this form of shahada is intrinsically linked to a mode of mysticism, which scholars have dubbed *civil mysticism*. This notion of civil

mysticism (or civil spirituality[17]) stems from a type of critique that bonds theory with praxis; it is an opposition to the status quo, and ultimately, with regards to Shariati's general mindset, it is "the cultural science of resistance" (Manuchehri, 34). In short, Shariati's Muslim Witnessness is a civil spirituality that any Muslim community, which comprises of martyr-witness agents ought to operate within, if they are ever to attain emancipation. Shariati believes that such freedom can only be attained through an adamant opposition to passivity and violence by Muslims who are also bent on being civically engaged and socially responsible. In this chapter, I examine Shariati's mystical writings, named *kaviriat*,[18] to explore how he develops Muslim witnessness in tandem with Sufi mysticism to expound upon a *literary* framework for a Muslim emancipation which can ultimately lead to active citizenry.

Given the many pitfalls Muslim communities find themselves surrounded by—Islamophobia and neoliberal absorption from outside, Islamic fundamentalism, self-orientalism, orientalism-in-reverse from the inside—it is crucial at this juncture to return to what it means to be Muslim: in the words of Shariati, it is time to "return to one's self" *(Khodsazi Enghelabi*, 22). I investigate Shariati's notions of Muslim Witnessness in the light of his civil mysticism as an ethical and empathic development of his vision of an Islamic indigenous emancipatory discourse, which can lead to an indigenous democratic socialism.

Emancipation in the Marxist Tradition

Marx's "Zur Judenfrage" (On the Jewish Question) was published in 1844. In it we find

[17] a term that can be translated as civil 'erfan or civil Islamic Gnosticism or civil Islamic mysticism

[18] Literally, Deserts or Desert-like, is defined by Shariati himself as a distinct genre, which majorly appear in his book *Hobut dar Kavir* [The Descent into Desert] and contains most of his ascetic-mystic writings.

Marx's first attempt at delineating what constitutes emancipation, namely that emancipation needs to be understood as "civic, political emancipation." It is also his earliest attempts at formulating historical materialism. Indeed, it is suggestive that Marx's impactful and expansive oeuvre should begin with an essay on the topic of emancipation of the religious, in this case Jewish, subject.

It was about 40 years later, however, that Marx's confidant would write on the topic of religion's emancipatory qualities. In 1894, only one year before his death, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) wrote an article for the journal *Die Neue Zeit*, entitled "On the History of Early Christianity." He begins thus, almost *in media res*: "The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people" (239). Throughout this article whose subject matter ranges from the history of Christianity to peasant uprisings in Europe, and from Kabbalah to the Book of Revelations, Engels constantly reminds the reader of the significance of beginnings, especially the very genesis of Christianity. With a question, he reminds us of the social class of the first adherents to Christianity: "what kind of people were the first Christians recruited from," Engels asks. "From the 'labouring and burdened,' the members of the lowest strata of the people, as becomes a revolutionary element," (241) he answers. Returning to German philosopher Bruno Bauer (1809-1882), who Marx had criticized in "Zur Judenfrage" for his slant understanding of religion in a secular state, Engels assesses Bauer's claims on another front: History. He reminds the reader that "the New Testament accounts of Jesus and his disciples are deprived for Bauer of any historical background: they are diluted in legends in which the phases of interior development and the moral struggles of the first communities are transferred to more or less fictitious persons"

(241).

Therefore, for Engels, when to evaluate the emancipatory powers of religion in the state, it is crucial to see it within the historical context. As he notes, in the first section of this three-part essay, in the Middle Ages mass movements "were bound to wear the mask of religion" (241). Interestingly, in the footnote to this remark, he contrasts mass movements in the "Christian West" with Islamic movements of the East. While the uprising of the "Christian West" are only disguised as religious, "Oriental" Islamic movements are "couched in religion but have their source in economic causes; and yet even when they are victorious, they allow the old economic conditions to persist untouched" (241). As such, he asserts that while the Christian uprisings aim to tear down the old and begin anew, the Muslim popular risings, result in a perpetual regeneration, the end of which returns to the beginning. The validity of Engel's perspective on Islam is beside the point. The importance of this to the discussion at hand is threefold: first, when stripped from their historical contexts, readings of religion and religious movements are lopsided at best, and verge on the tendentious. Indeed, a historical understanding of religious uprisings will be useful in understanding emancipatory movements in general. Second, one would prove quite economical with the truth if one were to agree with the commonly upheld view which maintains that Marx and Engels find religion to be a deterrent to political emancipation. The maxim that religion is "the opiate of the masses", which Marx and Engels's approach to religion is commonly reduced to, was written very early in their career, and is too often taken out of context of the entirety of their oeuvres. Third, in Engels's assessment of Islamic uprisings, which he sees as following a pattern of periodical recurrence, one can find affinities with recent studies on Islamic uprisings.

Moreover, two things stand out in Engels' comparison between early Christianity and

the labour movements: first, he claims that Christianity is originally a call for emancipation since it rests on the promise of "redemption from bondage and misery" (239). As such, like the modern labour movements, Cristianity is a movement of the oppressed. Second, as he builds on this theory, Engels claims that for the "Christian" religion is only a garb, or an excuse to abolish the old economic order and establish a new one, the result of which is progress for the society. For the Muslim, on the other hand, religion is never an excuse to abolish the old economic order and establish a new one. Engels argues that the old is abolished precisely because it has become faithless, and what needs to be renewed is the faith, not the economic order. Both faiths lead their societies to permanent revolution believes Engels; however one progresses economically and the other remains stagnant.

The ABC of Religious Emancipation

Rational emancipation and Progress, as American philosopher and political theorist Fred Dallmayr writes, are hallmarks of the Enlightenment and of "modern" Western civilization which are historically implicated with colonial narratives of domination, of restructuring, and of having authority over non-hegemonic/non-Western religions (*Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* 1). The human emancipation discourse of the Enlightenment, however, was based on assumedly universal rules that excluded diverse cultural traditions from non-Western vantage points (xxi). On the other hand, emancipation in the case of India for instance, as Dallmayr argues, "is not a matter of withdrawal or retreat," but it is rather a matter of "transformation or transfiguration" that affects human life as a whole (80). Emancipation, therefore, in a non-Western context, does not necessarily presuppose an increase in individuality, or a lack of attentiveness to sociopolitical context on the part of the individuals.

In fact, Dallmayr demonstrates that Western understanding of human emancipation as "the growth of autonomy and self-determination" politically translates into "liberal democratization" (158). Thus, a non-Western definition of human emancipation can include a form of resistance to the hegemony of liberal democracy. Dallmayr calls not for a denial of emancipation, but for its reformulation from "emancipation from," to "emancipation through" culture and cultural diversity (208). As such, religious emancipation becomes opposed to the way in which Marx and Engels used the term. By religious emancipation, they meant freeing discourses or states *from* religion whereas, following Dallmayr, the religious emancipation, I have in mind here is emancipation *through* religion. Following that, the issue at hand becomes first the concept of religion itself, and then the relationship between religion, as an emancipatory agent, and politics.

Religion, as postcolonial scholars such as distinguished anthropologist of religion Talal Asad have poignantly argued, is not a normalizing concept, nor is it a "thing" that can be located in the world. Religion is a modern construct, as Asad writes in his introduction to *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), and as such it is "integral to modern Western history" (7). Religion as that which has a transhistorical and transcultural "essence" that can be defined and analyzed from a "secular" standpoint, Asad reminds us, has its roots in the Enlightenment project of "objectively" categorizing and quantifying the world through the imposition of Eurocentric knowledge (15). Defining an essence for religion, he asserts, opposes that very essence to the assumed essences of other categories such as politics, law, and sciences. This conceptual distinction of "essences" leads to the "essential" separation of religion from politics, itself a founding element of liberalism and a "modern Western norm" (15).

Historically, the concept of "religion" emerged in the second half of the 17th century as

one means of distinguishing Christian colonizers from colonized "primitives." Religion is also, quite importantly, an English-language category with (colonial) implications and denotes distinctions that do not translate into non-European and non-hegemonic languages such as Farsi and Arabic. "Religion" as stated above in English-language scholarly rhetoric is considered not only distinct but also mutually exclusive from "politics," thus from "power." The "religion proper," therefore, is distinct from power. These assumptions, however, do not hold for those who think, speak, and live in Farsi and Arabic, among many other non-hegemonic languages. The assumption that religion is mutually exclusive from politics should not, as postcolonial scholars of religion insist, be taken as natural or a given not only because it would betray historical and geographical indifference but also because this hegemonic conceptualization of religion organizes knowledge of the world in a very particular and, importantly, colonial way. The binary division of the world between "religious" and "non-religious", as though this is the natural order of things, takes for granted contentious aspects of modern ideology that recent scholars of religion such as Timothy Fitzgerald and Richard King (among others) seek to uncover.

In "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics" (2011), Asad is concerned with the relationship between religion and politics (36). He begins by differentiating between the two terms of "religion" and "faith" that are (problematically, he later argues) interchangeable. Understanding religion as faith, he writes, assumes that "the basis of a universal conception of religion," is "an ineffable experience" (38). But religion, as Asad reminds us, involves and brings together desires and practices of different peoples in situated historical contexts (39). That is why universalist definitions of religion are problematic. Defining "religion" is not an intellectual activity, he posits, because it already always entails peoples, their changing

desires, anxieties, passions, and satisfactions," and it carries too many implications for the organization of social life (39).

The question of what counts as religious belief is linked to "how lived experience acquires its plausibility" (Asad 47). Lived experiences were quite different in pre-modern times. Prior to the construction of modern concepts of religion, people were "porous". Being porous meant having no clear and established boundary between body and soul, beliefs and deeds, and outside and inside world (47). Such binaries, in other words, are modern constructs. For porous people, therefore, religion was not something to be applied to beliefs only, to the inside world and not the outside world (47). The binary modes of conceiving of religious beliefs and their functions in an individual's life are relatively recent constructs and on par with the secular narrative of modernity that links civilized societies with their level of rational disenchantment from the world which entails the "freedom" of choice as to whether to have religious beliefs or not (47-48).

The binary mode of thinking discussed, Asad writes, maintains a "malaise" at the heart of the experience of modernity caused by humanity's purported coming of age, its "liberation" from superstitions and "primitive" religious beliefs. This malaise is, supposedly, due to the rationale that holds that modernity has caused the "disenchantment" of the world. The malaise, however, is assumed to be "cured" if we choose to believe in religions as transcendent providers of "enchantment" (48). However, and to reiterate the initial claim, to define religion in solely transcendent terms hinges on the modern understanding of religion solely as faith.

In the political landscape, Asad argues, "the modern secular state" with its guardianship of the individual's freedom to choose their beliefs, in fact privileges certain beliefs over others; this he writes, is a result of not considering the "belief," *per se*, but rather

of considering only its functions in politics. There is a problematic double standard at work here that Asad demonstrates with examples: the cultivation of sensibilities or "external" forms of religious beliefs through politics in the "Euro-Americas" is considered as a given or a basic right. But the very same thing in Muslim countries has been portrayed as "constraint and repression" by the "Euro-Americans" (53-54). What causes such a rift is the incompatibility of democratic sensibility with democracy as a state system. Democratic sensibility argues for dignity, care, and empathy for everyone; it is inclusive, mutual, and ethical. Democracy as a state system, on the other hand, seeks to bring together protection of subjective rights with nationalism and as a result becomes "fundamentally exclusive" (56). While Asad's analysis highlights the tension between democratic sensibility and the state system, it's important to consider, as Rancière does in *Hatred of Democracy,* that democracy itself is not a monolithic entity defined by a set of values, but a complex process that can manifest as both the will of the many and the structure of the state, each with its own contradictions and challenges.

Modern conceptions of political belief are therefore functions of the liberal nation-states (57). Significantly and important to the project at hand is that, as Asad cogently argues, the dichotomy at the heart of liberal nation-states will always lead to a definition of religion as the "other" of emancipation, liberation, progress, and change. Emancipation, liberation, progress, and change have come to be the markers of modernity. Modernity, as demonstrated, stands on colonial understandings of religion in need of de-construction. Religious emancipation, therefore, as has been demonstrated, must be understood as intrinsic to issues of political governance, power, and other structural forms of domination over the land, the people, and their cultures.

Following Asad, religion may also be viewed as that through which emancipation can

be achieved. Dualistic understandings of religious/non-religious discourses are reductive, a legacy of Eurocentric Enlightenment thinking that has long tried but failed to supersede dichotomous understandings of religious lived experiences. Therefore, understanding such interpretations as defunct colonial projects, intrinsically tied to structural forms of oppression, domination, and authority over non-Western religions, may help in turning the table on the subject and to peer at it from the eyes of the people who exercise freedom and equality through religious lived experiences.

Emancipation *through* Islam

Taking this into the context of Iran, I believe for the ideas that culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the essence of Shi'ism was reformulated as a politicized ideology perpetually opposed to authority. Sir Mohammad Iqbal phrased such ideology as a divine Dionysiac force that could revitalize Muslim identity. Shariati expanded that formulation to a Muslim community that should rejuvenate *in perpetuum* until it reaches a classless society. And along those lines, scholar of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature Hamid Dabashi concludes that as a religion Shi'ism is essentially involved in a process of scapegoating a son-figure to continuously mark a new beginning for its believers.

In his introduction to *Shi'ism, A Religion of Protest* (2011), Dabashi superimposes Sigmund Freud[6]'s psychoanalytical methodology and Oedipal theory, from the 1913 book *Totem and Taboo*, onto Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular. Dabashi seeks to understand Islam and Shi'ism in terms of their primal murder, the guilt of which, it is argued, has formed these religions. That this originary moment—mourned and venerated—refers to the death of a son (Ali, son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad and/or Hossein, son of Ali and grandson to Prophet Muhammad) at the hands of his father (adherents of tribal patrimonialism

who disputed with these son-figures over different interpretations of Muhammad's prophetic legacy) renders Islam and Shi'ism as paradigm(s) of a son-religion (Dabashi 13-14). At the heart of both narratives, Dabashi attests, resides a trauma and the subsequent guilt of infanticide (14).

Dabashi argues that this guilt of infanticide, in the case of Shi'ism, mainly stems from the cultural memory of the events of the Battle of Karbala. In 680 AD, Having repeatedly requested from Imam Hussein that he visit Kufa to lead the anti-Umayyad movement, the Kufans apathetically turned their back on him and watched as he was murdered by Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah, the seventh caliph (15-16). Every time Shi'ites commemorate the event of Karbala in Ashura through "re-enactments of and atonement for having killed their [Islam's] bravest son [Hussein]" (15), they at once remember and aim to forget their guilt of having betrayed their martyred Imam. Thus, Shi'ism is born out of infanticide and father-figures killings their son-figures is telling to Dabashi of an underlying "psychoanalysis of guilt" (22) within the Shi'ite community implicated in the infanticide. This psychoanalysis of guilt is perpetually renewed every time a rebellious son-figure is murdered by the father-figure in power, whenever a party who has legitimate right to rule is disposed of by a non-legitimate ruler. This dynamic network results in Shi'ism being "a youthful religion" (22). This is precisely why Dabashi argues that Shi'ism can be a particularly progressive force in socio-political terms. Shi'ism for Dabashi is the revolutionary religion of son-figures who distrust the authority of their father-figures and their power. Shi'ism as such becomes the religion of fighting the authority, the established institutions and their power. What guarantees the perpetual youth of this religion is that the moment son-figures gain power, they have already been identified as father-figures against whom the next generation of son-figures would

rebel—a paradigm of 'revolution that devours its own children'. Shi'ism as such, for Dabashi, is a religion of constant protest (23).

Sufist Love as Emancipatory

Similarly, Pakistani poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), one of the main ideologues of modern Islamic subjectivity (Vahdat 19), believed that Islam is a religion of perpetual change. Iqbal thought that the self in modern day was wrought with modern ills; but the self could be stripped of these ills through a passion that sociologist Vahdat Farzin translates to "Sublimated Dionysianism" (Vahdat 38). While the notion of sublimated Dionysianism clearly follows the Nietzschean principle,[19] it is devoid of the sexual/sensual connotations that a Dionysiac force originally imports.

Iqbal's Dionysianism is *eshgh*, which quite literally translates to *love* (38) but with far wider connotations. He praised *eshgh* for bestowing on humans a quality that could enchant the world. In verse, and in tune with 16th-century British poet Sir Philip Sidney's line "her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (85), Iqbal writes that through eshgh, "Man unveils mysteries, though he himself is a mystery / God made the world fair; Man made it more fair" (Vahdat 38). In Iqbal's thought-system, *eshgh* can restore the passion and enthusiasm that is lacking in modern life. It can perpetually remold humans to perpetually remold the world (39). Metonymously, he substitutes *del* [heart] for *eshgh*, so as to indicate that by love he does not mean a platonic, sublunary love, but one that is grounded in the corporeal. Most importantly, he associates this passion with a revitalizing dynamism (39).

[19] In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche understands the Dionysiac as a "madness" or an "ecstasy" "from which both the tragic and comic arts emerge" in Ancient Greece (7).

Iqbal believes that one must be like the free being who is always innovating and avoiding repetition, not the slave who dwells in repetition; one must be free and have mastery of time, and distance oneself from the slave who is taunted by the past (39). In other words, the key in Iqbal's thought-system is movement. He found that this love for movement exists in the Shiite notion of Islamic Jurisprudence, *fiqh*. *Fiqh* I this context becomes what keeps the possibilities of re-interpretations of Islam open (40). Hence Iqbal criticized Sunnism for closing the doors to interpretations of Islam. For him, "perpetual change" was the key (40). In his lectures, he even hints that the *Quran* also supports this idea of perpetual change (41). As such, Iqbal was in pursuit of constructing a Muslim subjectivity that emphasized the Dionysian elements which would promote passion over passivity, and perpetual change over a constant embrace of the status quo.

Correspondingly, Iqbal's political thought is also infused with this emphasis on a Dionysianism informed by the Divine. Although he seeked to nuance it, he still supported the idea of the revolution of the proletariat (48). In a poem, he equated the relationship between the downtrodden and the wealthy to the literary characters of Farhad and Parviz. In the 12th-century, Persian poet Neẓāmī's *Khusrow and Shirin* (1175-1191), Farhad was a sculptor who fell in love with Shirin, when she was already engaged to Prince (Khusrow) Parviz. When Parviz learned that Farhad was in love with his fiancée, he schemed a way to eliminate him: the prince told Farhad that if he truly loved Shirin, he could have her only if he proved it first. He sent him away on the impossible task of carving stairs out a mountain that led towards Shirin. During the quest, Farhad dies out of exhaustion. Iqbal believes that in the modern age, gone are the days where Farhad would surrender to King Parviz. He writes: "Farhad has changed his pickaxe for the scepter of Parviz. / Gone are the joy of mastership, the toil of

servitude" (Vahdat 47). Nevertheless, he thought that what social revolutions lacked was precisely the Divine and the Dionysian. Iqbal indeed believed that the slave needs to break from bondage, but as Vahdat writes, this for him could only happen through "non-obedience to non-God" (49). Iqbal found the epitome of this non-obedience, this revolt, in Imam Hussein, the Shi'ite Imam. In the Battle of Karbala, despite knowing that he would be defeated and killed, Imam Hussein fought against the greatly superior army of Yazid, and died. In a poem about the events of Karbala, Iqbal writes that by choosing to die for the principle of *laa elah*, "non-obedience to non-God," Hussein has forever "uprooted tyranny" and given Islam a new life (49).[20] This is the form of republicanism in which Iqbal believed. In this viewpoint, social forces should continue believing in Islam, and by the model of Imam Hussein, strive for emancipation through continuous non-conformism towards all authority.

Ali Shariati's Theory of Muslim Emancipation: The Centrality of Shahada

Ali Shariati was to a large extent under the influence of Iqbal's thoughts, especially in his views on Husseini republicanism. Many have credited Shariati with the idea of transforming Shi'ism from a faith into a political ideology, and as such an embodied religion. Furthermore, as historian and sociologist Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi emphasizes in *Foucault in Iran* (2016), Shariati also relied on Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution (89). Trotsky's permanent revolution formulated a means by which less developed societies,

[20] fana, is the ultimate goal of Islamic gnoticism; translated literally as "annihilation of self," it derives from the "no" of the Shahada: "There is *no* god but God," there is *no* reality but the Reality. Man's self-existence is not real, since he is not God; therefore, the illusion that it is real must be annihilated (Chittick 71).

those "with a belated bourgeois development," might reach "*democracy* and *national emancipation*" (Trotsky 310).

In the context of Husseini republicanism, I believe that *shahada* lies at the heart of Shariati's permanent revolution. During his most politically active years, from the day he returned from France to Tehran until his exile to England (1965-1975), the leitmotif of his thought was revolution against oppression— what he believed was at the core of Shi'ism. For Shariati, the mission of the Prophet of Islam, was not only to bring forth a new religion but to move society towards a "classless utopia" through constant revolution (Abrahamian 144). This mission was what Shariati believes, Imam Ali, the first Shi'ite Imam continued, and this was what Imam Hussein, by fighting Yazid against all odds, strived for in Karbala (144). For these figures as well as for Shariati, the main goal of Islam is to stand against authority. In the modern era, Shariati believes every place is Karbala and every day is Ashura (145). He believes that the intelligentsia of his day need to "rediscover and revitalize the true essence of revolutionary Islam" (144). This is indeed what he practiced during his own life. In his reformulation of certain Islamic concepts, he sought to define the *ummah* (Islamic community) along the lines of Iqbal's perpetually changing Muslim subjectivity as "a dynamic society in permanent revolution" (144).

In other words, concurring with Dabashi that Shi'ism, as a religion of martyring the son-figure was instrumental in pulling off the revolution of 1979, and looking at this through Shariati's theories of *shahada*, I find martyrdom to be at the historical and theoretical root of such perpetual change. Therefore, I investigate the notion of *shahada* by focusing on its understudied facet: martyrdom's double, witnessing.

In Dabashi's understanding of Shi'ism, and central to the religion which he designates

as a religion of protest, there are two concepts: *mazlumiyyat* which he translates as innocence, and *shahada* which he translates as martyrdom. Dabashi does indeed acknowledge that the translated are akin to placeholders, and that neither transmit their source faithfully into English. Nonetheless, the entire premise of the *Religion of Protest* is based on one facet of *shahada*, which is martyrdom. Yet, as one of the five pillars of Sunnism, and as an admission of belief in *Tawhid* (or one-ness of God) and *Nabuwwah* (prophethood of Muhammad) in Shi'ism, *shahada(t)* possesses a double meaning. Unlike 'martyrdom', their English counterpart, which has lost its original Greek double- meaning, *shahada* in Arabic and *shahada* in Farsi still refer both to martyrdom and witnessing simultaneously. *Shahada*, what I have chosen to translate as *witnessness*, can mean both the state of being a martyr, and the state of being a witness. Witnessness is a term I borrow from literary theorist Robert Harvey. In Harvey's *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (2010), the condition of being a witness is key to the establishment of ethical relations among humans. Hence witnessness –the ever-present condition of being a witness– refers to the ethical potential present in all individuals by virtue of which they can feel empathy towards fellow humans. As such, witnessness is a human faculty that relies on imagination and can be cultivated through the act of reading. It is a universally-shared capacity for fellow feeling that leads to responsible action. Responsible action is by nature social because it is always already oriented towards others as extensions of oneself.

Thus understood, *shahada* has the double meaning of martyrdom and witnessness. In Persian poetry, with all its witticism, one can see the play on the double meaning of *shahada* especially with regards to a beloved, be it God or otherwise, from classical poetry to more contemporary forms. For instance, in the following verse by the classical poet Muṣlih al-Dīn

Sa'di (1213-1291), the sweetness of witnessness is both an utterance, as in a testimony, and an actual experience, as in death. "In drinking that bitter pail of poison, / one better Utter the sweet taste of witnessness to the letter".[21] Or in another poem, the mystic Khwaju-e Kermani (1290-1349) uses legal terms to refer to witnessness. In other words, he uses the language of testimony to capitalize on the double meaning of shahada. "If the witness claims his deposition is only his martyrdom, / What need is there for litigation when God is his witness?".[22]

A most salient example of witnessness can be found in the poems of Iqbal himself, especially in his *Jāvīd-nāmeh* (1932; literally *The Song of Eternity*). A kind of *Divine Comedy* in the style of Rumi's *Mathnawi*, *Jāvīd-nāmeh* is itself a mathnawi.[23] Unlike the *Divine Comedy* it is not a vision of the afterlife but an odyssey into the heavens, reminiscent of Muhammad's *mi'raj*.[24] Therefore, it resembles the *Divine Comedy* in content, and in form, follows the *Mathnawi*. Iqbal is the main character, and Rumi is comparable to his guide Virgil. In one parable, after encountering Said Halim Pasha, the Ottoman *vizier* [minister], they meet the pan-Islamist activist and politician Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897), who asks Iqbal to deliver a message to the Nation of Russia which had just emerged from the Bolshevik Revolution. But first, he begins by lambasting the current Muslims: "The quest and

[21] بلی که در چشیدن آن جام زهرناک / شیرینی شهادت ما در زبان شود"

[22] گر مدعای کشتنش اشهد شهادت است / دعوی چه حاجت است که اشهد گواه اوست

[23] Muzdawidj in Arabic Poetry; "used in extensive narratives and long stories which cannot easily be treated of in poems with one specific rhyming letter" ("Mathnawi" in Encyclopedia of Islam)

[24] The prophet Muhammad's telepathic journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his mystical ascent from earth to the heavens

aim of Quran is otherwise; The practice and way of Muslims otherwise. / Wintry and fireless are Muslim hearts today; Bosoms all devoid of Muhammad's love today".[25]

Further, by comparing contemporary Russian revolutionaries to the Muslims of the past, those Muslims who were perpetually against tyranny, he asks the Russians to learn a lesson or two from the perceived debacle Muslims took long ago: from a people always fighting against tyranny to an oppressed people who lacked all passion and motivation:

> "You who have weaved a great new order; You who have washed your hands of the older;
> You who like Islamists of yore,
> Raised the flag against the tsars unfurled:
> Do you seek to kindle a light in human consciousness?
> Then learn a lesson from Muslim consciousness".[26]

The great lessons that he wants to impart center around learning from the Quran, which banishes tyranny and promises the world to the oppressed (Al Qasas 28:05). But those lessons also include asking Russia to distance itself from the West and to see itself as what it is: historically and geographically nearer to the East. In two pivotal lines he writes: "O gracious *witness and martyr* of Thought! I speak to you of the faces of Thought! What is Quran, but a death knell for the opulent, And a helping hand for the weak and insolvent?".[27] In Iqbal's poem, there is no term of reverence that exceeds in esteem the "*shahed*" [the witness] or the "*shaheed*" [the martyr]. Like the older poets, Iqbal uses *Shahed* to mean God (for instance He

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[25] منزل و مقصود قرآن دیگر است / رسم و آئین مسلمان دیگر است / در دل او آتش سوزنده نیست / مصطفی در سینه او زنده نیست

[26] ای که طرح دیگری انداختی/ دل ز دستور کهن پرداختی/ همچو ما اسلامیان اندر جهان/ قیصریت را شکستی استخوان/ تا برافروزی چراغی در ضمیر/ عبرتی از سرگذشت ما بگیر

[27] ای شهید شاهد رعنای فکر / با تو گویم از تجلی های فکر / چیست قرآن؟ خواجه را پیغام مرگ / دستگیر بنده بی ساز و برگ

who witnesses everything, the Overseer), and the *shaheed* to mean he who gives himself unquestionably to the Truth, to God. As Farzin rightly points out, Iqbal's attitude towards Marxism is fraught with ambivalence. On the one hand, as in the passage above, he extols the sociopolitical accomplishments of the Bolsheviks. On the other, he chastises them for becoming materialistic. His approach towards the Russians in particular, and his definitions of *shaheed* and *shahed* in general, are consistent with his theory of Divine Dionysianism, the idea that spiritually-motivated movement and passion can lead the Muslim subject out of the mire of lethargy and bonds of colonialism. Only through such passion can the Muslim consciousness be replenished, he believes.

> For Shariati, Iqbal's Divine Dionysianism is tantamount to "reconstitution" or to "the reconstruction of the religious mindset." He deems it the first step in the right direction of raising the consciousness of Muslims about their own position in society. In fact, it could be suggested that in the framework of "rebuilding the Muslim mindset," Shariati's theory of *shahada*, as he borrows it from Iqbal, is analogous to, and just as instrumental as Marx and Engels' *der Blitz*: the lightning of thought that can raise proletarian consciousness. Integral to the process are the *shaheed* (the martyr) and the *shahed* (the witness).

In a semi-epistolary essay entitled "Hassan va Mahboubeh" (1975), written less than two years before his death, Shariati defines these concepts and encapsulates many of his main theories regarding *shahada*. He begins the short essay suggestively in the familiar tune of a fictive opening, "yeki bud, yeki nabud," [once upon a time]. The further the text progresses, the more the reader understands that the characters are based on factual people, and that the protagonist, the teacher, is Shariati himself. At the end the reader sees that the story is dedicated to a married couple, Mahbubeh Motahhedeen (1950-1974) and Hassan Aladpush

(1942-1950), two revolutionaries members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran killed by SAVAK[28] forces.

In an interrogative style reminiscent of the signature poetic style of the 20th-century Persian poetry, *monazereh* [dialogue poem], the antagonists of the story (the clergy, the fortune-teller, the shopkeeper, the filthy rich, the *khan* [master], the city folks, the gendarmes, and the peasant) take turns questionings the teacher's claims, which are as wide-ranging as the theories Shariati developed throughout his lifetime, all revolving about what he calls "the philosophy of. martyrdom" (14). The teacher chastises the people, arguing that they are selling themselves too short. "Freedom," he says, "is at hand" (15). The people refute him, asking in refrains what/who is his witness [about his promises of liberation]. Later in the text, Shariati divulges his main witnesses: Mahabubeh and Hassan, the two *shaheed* and *shahed*, and their witness is *shahada* itself. "In Islam," he declares, "shahada is itself a principle […] Shahada is the divulging of truths that have been suppressed, concealed, and denied […] Shahada is the vocation of truth-seekers in the age of constraints" (16). In doing so, Shariati defines his philosophy of *shahada* as a lifestyle that commits itself to freedom.

It is important to keep in mind that Shariati's *shahada* is an antithesis to *jihad*. For him, *shahada* does not mean sacrificing yourself for your own ideals. "We shall die a noble death for a null cause," proclaims Shariati, "if like [Mansur] Hallaj[29] we tread the path of love and burn

[28] Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar (SAVAK), was Iran's National Organization for Security and Intelligence from 1957-1979.

[29] Ḥallāj, Abu'l-Moḡiṯ Ḥosayn b. Manṣur b. Maḥammā Bayżāwi (857-922 AD) was a Persian mystic from [7] Fars, who became controversial for his saying ana-'l-haqq [I am the Truth], which resulted in his execution on the charges of blasphemy. His beliefs marked a sharp turn from Classical Sufism.

in the fire of the enemy's ignorance, thus, gloriously bequeathing one's life as recompense for the inadequacies of life and our being" (Khod-sazi-e Enghelabi 25) Furthermore, by *shaheed* Shariati means two things: one who is always *hazir* [present] and one who is always *shahed* [witness]. In a lecture titled "Az Koja Aghaz Konim" (1970), in order to expound on what he means by *shaheed* Shariati particularly emphasizes the etymology of the word. He understands the word's Arabic root sh-h-d as *presence*, livelihood, *testimony*, and what is accessible. Thus, central to this treatment of *shaheed* is what Shariati calls presence and witness. Throughout his oeuvre, shahada and *hozur* [presence] appear together. "Shahada, he says, is making your presence felt in the historical strife of justice against injustice […] A shaheed is present in all battlefronts between truth and falsehood; the shaheed is witness to and present in all jihads between justice and injustice." The flipside is then also valid. Those who make their presence felt are *shaheed*. Therefore *shahada* is not a mode of death, but a lifestyle.

Hozur, or Active Citizenry as the Instigator of Emancipation in Muslim-Majority Nations

Having discussed the theory of *shahada*, I want to continue by relating this theory to active citizenry –what constitutes the *shahada*-infused lifestyle. The importance of this undertaking is twofold: Concurring with Mojtaba Mahdavi that "Shariati is an *unfinished project*[10]" and that "there is much *unthought*" in Shariati's thought" (original emphasis), I believe that the reinterpretations of Shariati's "intrinsic ideas," can be advantageous in the era of Post-Islamism, not only from a sociopolitical standpoint but also from a literary one (Post-Islamist Trends in Postrevolutionary Iran 102). Second, it can be suggested that in the framework of "rebuilding the Muslim mindset," Shariati's theory of *shahada* is analogous to, and just as instrumental as Marx and Engels' *der Blitz* understood as the lightning of thought that can raise

proletarian consciousness.

Sociologist Asef Bayat's notion of "The Art of Presence" is the most relevant contemporary theorization of this form of *shahada* that involves having one's presence felt. In *Post-Islamism at Large* (2013), Bayat begins by defining Post-Islamism as a trend, the signs of which were perceptible in the Green Movement of Iran and in the Arab Spring, movements that acknowledged "secular exigencies," sought "freedom from rigidity," and an abolishment of "the monopoly of religious truth" (8). Accordingly, Bayat argues that Post-Islamism "favors a civil and nonreligious state, [and] accords an active role for religion in the public sphere" (8). In his latest book, *Revolution without Revolutionaries* (2017), recollecting his active participation in the Islamic Revolution of Iran, he explains how Shariati was the ideologue of that "last great revolution" (5), and someone who as "a third-way" (29) strategist "deployed a Marxian egalitarian ethos to particular cultural historical settings," namely Islam (29). Today, in the absence of such ideologues, Bayat contends that revolution lacks the initial force for taking of, and that they therefore become half revolutions, or "refolutions" (155). About this, scholar of West Asian Studies Siavash Saffari writes that in the context of the ongoing shift to post-Islamism, the brand of indigenous modernity that Shariati and neo-Shariati's advocate appears to be "particularly well-positioned for addressing some of the pressing issues which Muslim societies are faced with today" (Beyond Shariati 171). It is difficult if not erroneous to identify Bayat as a proponent of Neo- Shariati-ism. However, in his last two books Bayat delineates his vision of paths towards democracy in Muslim-majority countries, which have much in common with the "Neo-Shariatisti discourse." His "Art of Presence" historicizes Shariati's concept of *shahada* and adapts it to the current times. This represents an advancement of Shariati's "unthought" about *shahada*.

In *Life as Politics* (2009), Bayat begins by defining his concept of social nonmovements as the collective actions of ordinary peoples who share an ethos of resistance against authoritarianism. The activities of these collectives are more often than not guided by identifiable ideologies and are oriented towards social change. In the Middle East, nonmovements are those mobilizations of the ordinary peoples who occupy public spaces in active ways previously forbidden by the state. This mode of activism causes conflicts between the participants and the officials who see their authoritarian control over public order to be compromised. It is this courageous and active assertion of collectives despite social constraints that Bayat calls "the art of presence" (26). The art of presence as such is a fundamental political moment, and indeed a hopeful one, in which against all odds and despite the authoritarian rule, nonmovements form resistance, circumvent constraints, express their agency actively, and have their voices heard in a nonviolent way. A sustained art of presence, therefore, is the basis for active citizenry grounded in social responsibility and a platform for the production of alternative ideas and politics. In short, and in the words of Bayat, "the art of presence is the story of agency in times of constraints" (26). Bayat ends his book by reiterating that neither silence nor violence will aid the Muslim Middle East overcome its current plight. Democratic reform in the region is only possible, he suggests, by a reliance on indigenous movements.

The similarities between Asef Bayat's Art of Presence and Shariati's theory of *shahada* are manifold. Both emphasize the emancipation of the subject, investigating ways of giving agency to the individual through a collective with shared goals. Both stress that their action-oriented philosophies are reserved for times of constraints, times in which citizens cannot have their voices heard through legal means. The action they both call forth revolves

about the need for having one's presence felt in non-violent ways. For both, the constraint impeding agency is mainly embodied by oppressive authoritarian rule. And for both, the main means with which it can be circumvented culminate in an active citizenry based on a social responsibility advocating change for the betterment of all citizens. Both emphasize resistance to the status quo. Untimately, the point of departure for both Shariati and Bayat is a thought-system based on indigenous movements, motives, and moments.

A Literary Understanding of Shahada as Witnessness

In tandem with Bayat's Neo-Shariati notion of the Art of Presence, which I infer as a form of *shahada*, I want to propose a literary dimension to Bayat's concept, and by extension, advance Shariati's theory of *shahada* into the literary domain. Following that, I want to suggest that witnessness is *shahada* both literally and literarily.

An understanding of literature—even witness literature—through the lens of Shariati's theory of *shahada* can help redeem the concept of subjectivity, the subjectivity of the marginalized in particular, by stripping it of its easily-appropriated elements. This is possible by emphasizing the initial claims in Shariati's theory of *shahada* through an active intersubjectivity collectively opposed to oppression. In fact, literary witnessing is itself a form of having your presence felt. Literature, to use a phenomenological notion, is a form of "presencing". It displays what is present in presencing by turning intentionality into an issue, and thus engages the consciousness to be of, and about the intentional issue. In this regard, literature makes something out of nothing. This can be seen as the most revolutionary potential of literature, because it has the power to stand against the oppressive state of affairs. As Herbert Marcuse says of Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist poetry, good literature interprets what-is in terms of what-is-not (*One-Dimensional Man* 76). Therefore, going back to

Shariati's theory of *shahada* and Bayat's Art of Presence, a literary understanding of *shahada* is an investigation into the diverse ways in which subjects strive, in writing, for emancipation in times of constraints through a reliance on their indigenous cultures, therefore engaging in sustained active citizenry that promotes social responsibility *against the odds*. As Shariati says himself, a *shaheed* is an immortal truthful witness who is present at all times and who swims against the odds to attest to the T/truth (which is not always obvious). A definition that one might argue is also true for good literature.

An example of this literature can be found in Shariati's own work, the genre of which he himself labels as *Kaviriat*. The body of work that comprises Kaviriat is difficult to pin down. This is perhaps the reason why it is difficult to translate Kaviriat, even the term itself. Nevertheless, for the sake of the subject at hand, I take my cue from John Ruskin and translate Kaviriat as "desertness". Ruskin writes, "true desertness is not in the want of leaves, but life" (221). As such, what is central to Ruskin's desertness and to Shariati's Kaviriat is desertedness. In explanation of Kaviriat as a genre, Shariati acknowledges that desertedness is at the heart of it. He writes:

> "I have three kinds of writing: Social, Islamic, and Kaviriat (Desert), the latter which is more desolate than deserts. It is the exhaustive book of the pangs of being. It concerns how from the very moment of their creation, [humankind is…] exiled on earth; hence, the ecstasy of return, which is inhibited within the being of the human: […] this existential concern and innate thirst [to return] is the best manifestation of the intrinsic disease of the current human metamorphosis. This state is the state of being without one's self (*bi khudi*). It concerns the essential transformation of humankind, which is precisely what constitutes the great ill that we have come to term alienation" (Kavir 235)

From the above passage alone, one can induce that kaviriyat (which signifies a desert—a nothingness—that may produce something) is the account of the existential state of a

humankind borne out of constant concern about desertedness; it is a critique of that existence and as one can understand from Shariati's projects, a remedy of that state (the making of something out of nothing) in the form of a return to one's self. I argue that the critique and remedy of Shariati's exiled/deserted state best manifest themselves on literary grounds, in his *Kaviriat*, his collection of works seen as a whole. It is the manner in which *Kaviriat* addresses this existential state that renders the literary framework of witnessness well-situated to understand it. *Kaviriat* is dis-establishment-prone in motive (it goes against the status quo), indigenous in form (it encourages return to oneself), and emancipatory in content (it strives to liberate the community).

First, as Ali Rahnema explains in *An Islamic Utopian* (1998), Shariati resorts to writing in this genre after numerous instances of discontent with either the monopoly of the clerical establishment over religion, his contemporaries' mundanity in their concern for matters of daily life, or the government's escalating authoritarian rule. Therefore, it was the sociopolitical constraints that aggrieved Shariati, that provided him with the desire to circumvent them in writing, and that prompted him to reformulate his ideology of *shahada* in mystic terms. It was after his release from prison in 1975 that he found the motivation to do so, as Rahnema reminds us. Shariati resuscitated his mysticism as a "libertarian doctrine in contrast to institutionalized religion" (160), as a philosophical platform that could transcend the mundane status quo, and as "a politically combative Sufi discourse" intent on fighting for such values as "justice and freedom" (158).

Second, the form of the Kaviriat as a whole is an affective expression of mysticism. In the essay "On the Sad Passing of Jung" [Payan-e Gham-Angiz-e Zendegi-e Jung] (1969),

Shariati identifies these writings himself as a type of *shat'hiat*,[30] something that Rahnema also points out. Shat'hiat was a genre of writing that we see in the works of Sufis mostly from the Eight Century to the Thirteenth Century AD, from Mansur Hallaj to ibn Arabi. Overtaken by zealous spirituality, the Sufi wrote verses that gave voice to his innermost spiritual experiences and reflections, sometimes verging on blasphemy. In this respect, one can see that in form Shariati adheres to a genre of writing indigenous to his own culture. In this way, even formally he is following his own dictum of "return to one's self".

Thirdly, the mysticism of Sufis such as Hallaj, Rumi, and Abu Said Abulkhair was mostly entrapped in *circum fana* forms of spiritualism, a refusal to engage civically with society, and a desire instead to attain God through reclusion. As mentioned earlier, Rahnema says that in his later years Shariati reframed his mysticism to give it political force which could address the sociopolitical problems of his age. Therefore, Shariati's mysticism represents what political scientist Abbas Manuchehri calls civil mysticism. For Shariati, mysticism is a form of critique at one with the act of resistance, a bond between theory and praxis, an opposition to the status quo, and ultimately, with regards to Shariati's general mindset, "the cultural science of resistance." Ultimately, this resistance and deliberate opposition to the established status quo is what constitutes active citizenry for Shariati. In sum, what is intrinsic to the body of kaviriat as a whole is that it is a literary expression that turns into a parable of emancipation: signifying that to reach freedom, a circumvention of sociological and of political constraints is possible only through an expression indigenous to one's own culture. This is what I have called the quality of witnessness, or *shahada*.

[30] Rahnema defines this as "the ecstatic words of a Sufi" (145)

Shahedbazi, Queer Muslim Witness/Desire: The Resurgence of Islamically-Mediated Homoerotica

What precedes falls in line with Shariati's triadic formulation of the relations of humans in society: "erfan, barabari, azadi" In the words of Mahdavi who rearranges them in reverse order to emphasize Shariati's own priorities: "the trinity of freedom [azadi], social justice [barabari], and spirituality [erfan]. I shall add that the nebula I call Muslim Witnessness is central not only to Shariati's triad, and indeed to the entirety of his oeuvre, especially to the understanding of his Kaviriat in literary terms, but it is also at the heart of *shahada*. The latter is the instigator of sociopolitical change in Muslim-majority nations of the Middle East and North Africa, where the concept of *shahada* is indigenous to those cultures. Further, *shahada*/witnessness functions primarily through literature. In the following chapters, I will investigate how Muslims who identify as part of the 2S/LGBTQ+ communities have begun a literary movement of life writing which can be best understood through the framework of Muslim Witnessness, that is: a religiously-mediated queer desire.

As mentioned, shahed signifies witness, which in Islamic traditions, holds a deep and multifaceted meaning. In Islam, witnessing is not only an act of observing or testifying but also carries spiritual and ethical implications. It involves bearing witness to the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and the prophethood of Muhammad, which are central tenets of the faith. Additionally, being a witness in Islam can encompass aspects of social and moral responsibility, where one is called to witness truth, beauty, justice, and other facets of the God. This concept is integral in shaping the moral and ethical conduct of individuals within the community, emphasizing the importance of truthfulness and integrity in one's testimonies and/or responsibility to other members of the society.

As distinctively used in Sufi literature, on the other hand, shahed encompasses yet another concept. Sufi poets attribute the term to individuals of radiant beauty, symbolizing them as embodiments or testaments to the divine artistry and benevolence of the world's Creator (Foruzanfar as quoted in Shamisa 14).

In Sufi philosophy, physical beauty is regarded as a divine symbol, signifying God's presence in the world. The Sufi journey towards divine love, or 'eshgh-e haghighi,' often begins with the appreciation of this earthly beauty. This concept is known as 'eshgh-e Majazi' or metaphorical love, where the love for a beautiful being, seen as God's creation, is a step towards the ultimate love for God Himself. In historical Sufi circles, which were typically segregated by gender, the manifestation of divine beauty was often seen in young males or adolescents, leading to a cultural intertwining of homoeroticism with Sufi practices. Furthermore, the rise of Sufism occurred simultaneously with the golden age of Persian literature, significantly influencing many renowned Persian poets. Some of these poets, including figures like Rumi, were not only influenced by Sufism but were also prominent leaders within the Sufi tradition.

Sirus Shamisa, renowned Iranian literary theorist, begins his book on the topic of shahedbazi with this bold statement: "Essentially, Persian Classical literature is in one aspect homoerotic literature" (3). Since Farsi is a genderless language, it is difficult often to ascertain the gender of the beloved. In their poems, however, when Khurasani-style male poets, mention their lovers, they are predominantly referring to their male lovers, as can be evidenced by their blazonic descriptions of a lovers' sideburns or beard fuzz, and the like (Shamisa 39). For example, one of the earliest poems of this era reads, "His face is like the

moon that has put on a hat" (Tormozi Line 3, as cited in Foruzanfar 15). It is easy to see how the lover in this line is male, as hats were almost exclusively worn by men. Later, however, during the 11th century, through Avicenna's translation and adaptation of Plato's *Symposium* into Farsi, corporeal love became a function of God worship. By travelling to Iran, the idea of *Symposium* thus became Islamicized, and made Persian. Quoting Muhammad, Islam's final prophet, Avicenna writes that even the prophet would ask people "to quench their desires and needs through beauty and the beautiful" (225).[31] Avicenna stresses, however, that these desires ought to be sacred desires, not earthly ones; that is, they ought to manifest themselves in selfless love. Nevertheless, such perspective inevitably bonded worship to corporeal love, and vice versa. Thus, in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world, love relations among men became Islamically mediated, and likewise, Allah became homosexually mediated.

This literary tradition continued through the ages up to and until a little while after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905. It culminated in the poetry of a Revolutionary poet and politician, Iraj Mirza, whose oeuvre spans several literary genres, but whose fictional lovers are predominantly men. For instance, he writes "I saw Abdullah while roaming through the bazaar. / By Allah, I can swear that I saw the moon in the bazaar; / Should a God-worshipping Muslim glance at him but once during prayer, / His prayers would start in the name of Allah but end for Abdullah". On his way from the bazaar to the mosque, the narrator

[31] There are several other hadiths on this topic attributed to Muhammad; most famously, "Allah is beautiful, and he loves beauty," which became an excuse for Muslims to practice homosexuality, especially because the Arabic original uses a word for beauty that is masculine, *jamaal.*

(Iraj Mirza himself?), meets a beautiful young man named Abdullah (common Arabic name meaning servant of Allah) and forgets why he had come to the bazaar entirely.

Things, however, changed in the span of less than two decades. With the arrival of Western industrial modernity (through its wars with Imperial England and Russia) from the 19th century onward, certain Western notions such as secularism, capitalism, and humanism were imported into Iran. The meaning of freedom (*azadi*), a concept central to all three, therefore, changed entirely (Shafiei Kadkani 63). Whereas prior to the 19th century, "freedom" in Farsi and other languages across the Muslim world, often signified a rather contradictory notion – the height of freedom was absolute surrender to God[32] – its meaning, from the 20th century, signified a modernized social freedom (Shafiei Kadkani 64). Consequently, gender and sexual freedom became modernized too, and thus constitutionalized into such freedom that would ensure the gender and sexual freedom of all members of society. It was during Reza Shah's reign that laws for the protection of families, against the Islamic hijab, against rape, and against homosexuality were put into place (Afary 142).

One can witness this abrupt change through the scope of the narrative changes that came over folkloric legends in Iran. A vivid example is portrayed in the story of Dash Akal[33]

[32] The term "Islam" designated for the religion, is made up of the three words of s – l – m, together which in the Arabic language, may compose a large range of words to signify different forms of notions, all related to the concepts of "peace" and submission. A Muslim is a submitter to God, who is in search of peace. The contradictory notion of freedom stems from this Islamic epistemology.

[33] In his *Gofteh-ha,* the Iranian filmmaker, artist, critic, and poet, criticizes Sadeq Hedayat for having erased the history, but commended Kimiai for uplifting Hedayat's Dash Akal into stardom (137-8).

(Golestan 133-152). As the story goes, Dash Akal, was a *luti*. A luti[34] in the Persianate world was a respected outcast and a much-mythologized member of Iranian society, whose main concern was to eliminate evil from society – in all its forms – through his own will. Dash Akal lived in the Sardazak neighborhood of the city of Shiraz and the story takes place between 1910 and 1925. One day, a wealthy carpet-seller, asks Dash Akal to take care of his affairs in the case that he would die before his children come of age, and keep his eldest daughter into his own custody until she is ready to marry. Before long, the wealthy merchant dies and leaves all his wealth and his daughter into Dash Akal's custody. The story continues that Dash Akal had a male apprentice with whom he was in love. The apprentice, in turn, falls in love with the

[34] لِوطی pronounced loo-tee in Farsi historical text, has had different meanings in different periods of time: In the 10th century, lutis were equated with "catamites;" in the 11th century with "wine-drinkers, thieves, and whore-mongers;" in the 12th century with people who "cannot be trusted in commercial dealings;" in the 13th and 14th century , for instance, in Rumi's poetry, with "pederasts, and the related word *lavāṭi* (sodomy) is still used as such;" from the 17th century with "a jester attached to the princely court and to itinerant entertainers (acrobats, dancers, buffoons) who performed improvisatory comedy or who were accompanied by animals, typically monkeys, bears or goats that danced while accompanied by music and lewd songs;" and from the 19th century onward with "Robin Hood-type bandits and thugs, in the tradition of the *ʿayyār*, who sometimes challenged oppressive governors, provided strong-arm support for local secular and religious leaders and bullied their fellow townsmen" (Floor 30). More often than not luti refers to more than one of these characteristics simultaneously. The historical Dash Akal in 20th century, was a luti in the 19th century sense of the word, meaning he was a Robin Hood-type ayyar, but he was also a luti in the 13th-century sense of the word, as he was gay, not in the Greek pederast sense, but in the sense of shahedbaz. The fictional post-constitutional Dash Akal, on the other hand, does not have the previous premodern homosexual associations. As a matter of course, lutis have been exceptionally influential in Iranian history. See Hassan-i Sabbah (the Old Man of the Mountain) founder of the Order of Assassins. Or Sattar Khan and Baqer Khan, who in a bloody war with the local government helped constitutional revolutionaries gain control of the city of Tabriz; or Sha'baan Mi-Mokh (the brainless Sha'ban) who helped overthrow the only democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadeq.

merchant's daughter and one day after a bout of drinking, he rapes her. Dash Akal, fearing for his beloved apprentice's life, falsely confesses that he had committed the crime himself. Disdained and dishonoured, Dash Akal dies at the hand of a person who was angry for his having raped the girl.

In 1931/1932, at the hands of Sadeq Hedayat, hailed as the foremost Iranian modernist author, Dash Akal is memorialized in an eponymous short story, but with important changes, reflective of the modern new *norms* of a modern Iran. In this story, written less than two decades after the historical event, Dash Akal has completely changed: He harbours no homosexual love for his own apprentice, and neither does he (or anybody) rape the daughter. Instead, Dash Akal has feelings so intense for the daughter of the merchant that people eventually find out, but since the girl is in his care, he cannot in good conscience marry her, and instead marries the girl away to another prosperous merchant, and dies at the hands of his archnemesis, another luti called Kaka Rostam. After Hedayat's version of the story was adapted to film by Massoud Kimiai in 1971, the original tale disappeared, retaining only parts of Hedayat's retelling. In 2017, another cinematic adaptation was produced, which was similar to Kimiai's film in its narrative but assumed a comedic form, with added religious norms as congruent with the values maintained by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which oversees cultural products.

Religiously-mediated queer desire, however, is making a return in the memoirs of queer Muslims. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate this in the memoirs written in English by North American queer Muslims of colour in diaspora. This subgenre is still nascent, but it belongs to a larger body of works: queer Muslim of colour creative literature.

Interestingly, one main narrative element of such literature is the autobiographical – even if the work itself is fictional. For instance, Abdellah Taïa's novels written in French are largely autobiographical, however, they are set in fictional settings. In his *L'Armée du salut*, published in 2006 – his first novel after coming out publicly to the press[35] – Taïa tells the story of a homosexual man who travels to Switzerland to study in university, a path he had similarly taken in his younger days but to France. Similarly, most of Rabih Alameddine's novel, including his most celebrated *An Unnecessary Woman,* for which he won a finalist spot in the National Book Critics Circle Award and the California Book Awards Gold Medal in Fiction, is mostly autobiographical. As I have argued, one reason behind the choice for the autobiographical is its revolutionary potential – the witnessness of Muslim traditions[36].

The first English memoir written on the subject of queer Muslim desire is often credited to *Sex, Longing & Not Belonging: A Gay Muslim's Quest for Love and Meaning* by Badruddin Khan, published in 1997. This memoir articulates the complexities of negotiating a queer identity within the stringent heteronormative and patriarchal constructs of South Asian Muslim culture. Khan's narrative deconstructs the binary oppositions often encountered in traditional Islamic societies, where the confluence of sexuality, religion, and cultural norms creates a liminal space for queer identities. Khan's autobiographical discourse is a critical

[35] By some accounts, the first Moroccan author to come out publicly

[36] Other autobiographical literary fiction which are similarly written of and about queer Muslims by openly queer Muslims include:
Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman, The Angel of History, and The Wrong End of the Telescope*'; the poems of Fatima Ashgar in *If They Come For Us;* The novel *Bright Lines* written by Tanwi Nandini Islam (Tanaïs)*;* The novel *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar*; Guapa,* a novel by Saleem Ahmad; the *Thirty Names of Night*, a novel by Zeyn Joukhadar.

exploration of the self as Other, an examination of the queer subject positioned at the interstices of Eastern and Western cultural paradigms. It interrogates the hegemonic structures that govern sexual norms in Pakistani society, juxtaposing these with his experiences in the West, thus offering a critique of the cultural relativism surrounding queer identities in Muslim contexts. The memoir becomes a site of resistance against the monolithic representations of Muslim sexualities, challenging the dominant discourse through the lens of personal narrative. Khan's account is not merely an exposition of his own life but an embodiment of the struggle for recognition and acceptance within a framework that often renders queer Muslim identities invisible or marginal. His narrative traverses the terrains of longing and belonging, capturing the dialectical tensions between individual desire and collective cultural expectations.

Since, several queer Muslim have written and published their memoirs. In the span of only 6 years (2017-2023) celebrated and debut writers, have written memoirs such as *A Sinner in Mecca* by Parvez Sharma (2017); *Angry Queer Somali Boy* by Mohamed Abdulkarim Ali (2019); *Love is An Ex-Country* by Randa Jarrar (2019); *Life as a Unicorn* by Amrou al-Kadhi (2019); *We Have Always Been Here* by Samra Habib (2019); *A Dutiful Boy* by Mohsin Zaidi (2021); *Black Boy Out of Time* by Hari Ziyad (2021); *In Sensorium* by Tanaïs (2022); *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H (2023). The main focus of chapter 5 is the study *Hijab Butch Blues*. This memoir will be discussed in the context of its approach to Muslim queer relationality as it is performed through Muslim witnessness, and by its choice to directly engage with traditional Islamic sources, like the hadith and The Quran. Thus, a major question which I will pose in relation to the memoir is: how can one navigate Muslimhood and queerness today? By doing so, I ask how this memoir can contribute to the incipient field of study that is Queer Muslim Literature.

A major memoir that has contributed to the emerging literature is Tanaïs's *In Sensorium*. *In Sensorium: notes for my people*, employs an eclectic approach to witnessness of queer Muslim life. This approach is characterized by the interweaving of personal narratives with the broader historical context of Bangladesh, their ancestral homeland, with poetry and prose, with fiction and nonfiction, with the sensory and what she calls "the forgotten non-sensory." The notion of 'notes' as expressed in the subtitle serves as a multifaceted concept, encompassing various meanings such as designations or signs, sensory experiences related to music and perfume, and written records for memory and emphasis. This eclectic method allows Tanaïs to create a multisensory experience that is not only *for* the people, as the title implies, but also *in co-creation with* them. By signaling, performing, bringing attention to, writing, and evoking notes, Tanaïs establishes a form of Muslim queer relationality that operates at the crossroads of queerhood, femmehood, Bengali diaspora, and Muslimhood, without entirely relying on scripture and foundational Islamic texts. In other words, she centralizes this eclectic relationality rather than the 'Word of God' as what is central not only to Muslimhood but also to identifications with queerhood.

In the interstices of Sufism's shahedbazi and Islam's shahada lies a profound dialectic: the embodiment of the divine in earthly forms as a conduit to spiritual transcendence. Shahedbazi, transcending mere aesthetic appreciation, becomes an act of witnessing (shahada) — a testament to God's omnipresence. The Sufi's adoration of beauty, especially as manifested in homoerotic Persian literature, is not a mere carnal fascination but a metaphysical journey towards divine unity. This nuanced understanding bridges the gap between earthly love (Eshgh e Majazi) and the ultimate love for the Creator (Eshgh e haghighi), positing human desire within a sacred, revelatory framework. Modern queer

Muslim narratives, drawing from this rich tradition, extend this dialectic into contemporary discourse, reasserting the act of witnessing as an ethical imperative. These narratives not only reaffirm the diverse expressions of divine beauty but also contest hegemonic structures within Islamic and cultural paradigms, thus reinvigorating the essence of shahada in a modern context.

Chapter 4 . Muslim Queer Relationality as Critique of Neoliberalism

Introduction. Critique of Neoliberalism Contingent on Distinguishing *Homo Legalis* from *Homo-Economicus*

The original edition of Michel Foucault's second volume, *The Use of Pleasure,* included a loose slip of paper titled, "Please Insert," which offered Foucault's final plan for the entirety of *Histoire de la sexualité:*

> "Volume 1: *The Will to Know*, 224 pages.
>
> Volume 2: *The Use of Pleasures*, 296 pages.
>
> Volume 3: *The Care of the Self,* 288 pages.
>
> Volume 4: *The Confessions of the Flesh* (forthcoming)" (From the internal loose-leaf flyer, on which was written "Prière d'insérer," included in the original edition of *The Uses of Pleasure* in 1984)

Initially, Foucault's idea for the *Histoire de la sexualité* (hereon *Histoire*) was "a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity" (*The Use of Pleasure* 12). Specifically for *Volume 4* (published posthumously in 2018 as *Les Aveux de la chair* and translated into English as *Confessions of the Flesh*), his initial idea was a historical examination of "the Christian practices and doctrines of confessions" (*Confessions of the Flesh* viii). However, as he admits in the introduction to the second volume of *Histoire*, he changes the volumes' general focus from "a history of the experience of sexuality" to "the genealogy of desiring man" (24). Hence, *Les Aveux de la chair* focusses on the "experience of the flesh in first centuries of Christianity, and with the role played in it by the hermeneutic, and purifying decipherment, of desire" (*Confessions of the Flesh* viii).

Grounding much of his study in the works of early Christian Fathers, from Justin to Augustine, the reason Foucault provides for this change in approach appears in the

introduction to the second volume: "[In] order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of a 'sexuality,' it was essential first to determine how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire" (15). Especially in the final part of *Les Aveux de la chair*, Foucault highlights Augustine's work on original sin, which connected human sexuality to the Fall of Adam and Eve. According to Augustine, Adam and Eve's sin was an act of self-love, whereby they prioritized their desires over obedience to God. Foucault argues that Augustine's ideas contributed to a discourse in which sexual desire was seen as inherently sinful and requiring control through self-discipline and self-sacrifice. In this way, Christian teachings around sex and desire constructed a new understanding of the self as a subject needing constant examination and control.

Thus, according to Bernard Harcourt, in line with Foucault's archaeological approach, one main thread of this volume is a genealogy of the Modern subject – the juridical subject, the *homo legalis,*[37] the idealized subject of the law – which Foucault argues is borne by Augustine, especially in his *Confessions* and *City of God*. In this sense, Harcourt says that this volume, via the thread of the birth of the Modern subject, provides a critique of neoliberalism. Indeed, Foucault had suggested in his lectures in 1979, especially on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* that the neoliberal project introduced "the principles of the Rule of Law in the economic order," integrating legal principles into the economic system, and/or incorporating economic considerations into the legal order (178). In fact, the underlying theme

[37] In the Foucauldian sense, *homo legalis* could be seen as an idealized subject produced by disciplinary power, one who internalizes the rules and expectations of the legal system and regulates their own behavior accordingly. In traditional liberal thought, the legal subject is an individual endowed with certain rights and protected by the rule of law. The legal framework aims to preserve the individual's autonomy and freedom, ensuring equality before the law.

of *The Birth of Biopolitics* is that the critique of neoliberalism depends on distinguishing the modern legal subject from the economic subject, *homo economicus,* since in the neoliberal order, the two are deleteriously inseparable (Harcourt, Bernard E. "Michel Foucault, Confessions of the Flesh, Volume 4 of The History of Sexuality." *Critique 13/13*, Columbia University Law School, 4 Dec. 2019, blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/6-13/).[38] The main reason Foucault suggests is that neoliberalism reinterprets the role of the state, law, and individual rights, not only transforming the legal subject into an economic subject driven by entrepreneurial self-interest and market competition, but more importantly, what is at stake in neoliberal policy, Foucault says, is that the "multiplication of the 'enterprise' form within the social [and this] is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society." (148; for a full discussion on this, see Chapter 10 of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, more specifically, pages 242–257). By distinguishing these subjects (the legal from the economic) genealogically, Foucault critiques how neoliberalism reshapes the relationship between law, politics, and economics, subordinating not only individual rights to market logic but more importantly, as Wendy Brown reiterates in *Undoing the Demos*, "the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities — even where money is not at issue — and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*" (31). In

[38] One passage that directly addresses this appears in the same chapter, the lecture which was delivered on 21 March 1979: "The idea of utility taking shape within law and law being constructed entirely on the basis of a calculus of utility really was one of the stakes or dreams of all political criticism and all the projects of the end of the eighteenth century. The history of criminal law has shown that the perfect fit could not be made. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain the problem of homo oeconomicus without aiming to translate it immediately into the terms and forms of a legal structure" (*Birth of Biopolitics* 251).

this conception, what is at stake is that even the most subjective thoughts, wills, and subjectivities, even *desire*, is reconfigured according to the model of the market.

Following this argument, an analysis of the self-regulated desire of the modern legal subject, alongside but also distinguished from the market-driven desire of an economic subject, can offer a critique of the status quo by unveiling current neoliberalist integrated apparatuses. In *Confessions of the Flesh,* Foucault provides a genealogy of the legal subject of desire by examining how early Christian practices of confession and self-examination contributed to the formation of a new type of subjectivity, one that internalizes norms and regulations, fostering self-discipline and self-regulation. He argues that these practices of self-scrutiny and self-disclosure were key mechanisms through which individuals were encouraged to constantly monitor their own thoughts, actions, and desires, ultimately shaping their moral and ethical selves. It is important to note that this pattern of study follows Foucault's *savoir-pouvoir-sujet* (knowledge-will-subject) framework; while in previous volumes of *Histoire* he had elaborated on how knowledge and power inform the subject, in the fourth volume, he explains how subjectivity informs knowledge and power. As such, he gravitates toward desire, as an ethics of the subject, demonstrating how this ethics of the desiring subject is always already political.

It appears then that the study of the subject of desire is an exercise in paradox. If as Foucault suggests that the critique of neoliberalism depends on distinguishing the legal subject from the economic subject, how is such a practice in distinguishment possible since as Brown demonstrated (building on Foucault), the neoliberalist rationality shapes subjectivities completely as market participants, perpetually, exclusively, and universally as economic subjects? In other words: If neoliberalist rationality has assimilated the paradigm of the market

into every nook and cranny of modern life, regardless of whether money is involved or not, then how can one study desire without it having been configured in one form or the other through neoliberalism already? The bigger question is: How is it possible to study desire now, or from the dawn of neoliberalism up to the present, without it being inevitably intertwined with invisible market forces or unconscious economic motivations? In this dissertation, considering these questions – considering all these binding limitations – I ask: is there still room for resistance? Are there alternative modes of desire that inevitably exist *within* yet *resist* the all-encompassing reach of neoliberal rationality?

While the quest appears tortuous, the study of a subject as complex and significant as the subject of desire is certainly worthwhile. This challenge calls for an exploration of the ways in which desire might transcend or resist the influence of neoliberalism, by examining alternative frameworks, cultural contexts, or human motivations that might offer a different lens through which to understand desire. In this introduction, as you have seen, my first task was to present the significance and the limitations of the study: namely, the (im)possibility to study desire non-neoliberally.

In the next section, I will provide a brief genealogy of the academic study of desire by surveying the development of queer theory. With its foundational anti-normative premise, queer theory has significantly enriched the understanding and study of desire, offering critiques on the social and cultural constructions of sexuality, interrogating the power dynamics that shape these identities and experiences, and providing a lens to explore diverse expressions of desire that challenge traditional norms and assumptions. Particularly, I will focus on queer theory's subjectless critique. This approach aims to move beyond viewing subjects in queer theory merely in terms of their sexual identities. It seeks to expand the

discourse by integrating intersectional critiques. Such critiques recognize the limitations of analyses that focus on only one aspect, such as sexuality, gender, race, or class, advocating for a more comprehensive approach that considers the complex interplay of these various factors.

Following this, I will focus on a particular shift in the desiring subject, the Muslim queer desiring subject, as a religiously-mediated desire, but one whose both queerness and religion is understood anti-normatively. Foucault focuses particularly on Augustine's *Confessions* to genealogize the modern subject of desire. Augustine's confessional is neither the earliest example of a literary confessional nor is it the first to study desire as one that requires self-regulation. However, it did represent a paradigm shift in how the *Christian* subject understands desire – as that which requires regulation.[39] It provided a bridge from the classical notions of desire and self-regulation to the Christian conceptualization of self, sin, and the self-regulation of desire. Through Foucault we can see that examining testimonies of desiring subjects, as practices of confessions of the flesh, can provide a means to analyze what is characteristic of the legal subject: What distinguishes the legal subject from the economic subject is the former's self-regulatory characteristics which verges on the self-sacrificial, as the testimonial openly invites scrutiny from others too.

Following this, tying in discussions from the previous chapter, I argue that shahada (martyr and witness concurrently) in the memoirs of queer Muslim subjects represents a critique of neoliberalism by way of demonstrating a shift both in how religion is understood and how queer desire is understood in relation to religion. I introduce the concept of Muslim

[39] Foucault finds that Augustine is projecting classical works into Christian thought: In *Contra Julianum* (Against Julian), Augustine quotes Cicero's *Hortensius*: 'Intense pleasure of the body is incompatible with great thought' (Foucault 257).

queer relationality to highlight this shift in non-normative Muslim desire. While Foucault emphasizes the ways in which power operates through desire, he also acknowledges that desire can be a site of resistance to power. In this chapter, I focus on Muslim queer desire as an act of resistance. By understanding the ways in which desire has been regulated, controlled, and shaped by power relations, individuals can become more aware of the historical and social contexts that have influenced their desires and subjectivities. This awareness can potentially lead to the creation of new forms of resistance, as individuals challenge and subvert the power structures that have often sought to control their desires. Broadly, I study 21st century expressions of desire as an act of resistance in autobiographies written by queer Muslims of colour living in North America. In particular, I will focus on Lamya H's *Hijab Butch Blues* in the next chapter.

The Queer Other of Western Academic Queer Studies

A) A Genealogy

For Michel Foucault, genealogy is opposed to the attempt to trace origins ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 77).[40] Locating the origin of queer theory in Foucault's thoughts, therefore, would appear to be a precarious enterprise, if not a counter-productive one. Yet, as he writes, "to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 146). The commotion that passed over

[40] In "Nietzche, Genealogy, History," Foucault argues that genealogy is not about seeking to uncover the essence or true origins of something, but about uncovering the specific historical and social contexts that give rise to particular ways of thinking, speaking, and acting.

queer theory, from Foucault's *"offres de jeu"*[41] to the present, it is safe to say, has proved quite complex and dispersed. Foucault's game-opener simply introduced new methods of exploring "historically singular form[s] of experience," especially those which we think do not have a history, such as sexuality (*The Essential Works: Ethics* 199).

A broader overview of Foucault's thoughts may shed light on how this development transpired. As some scholars have discussed, two lines of inquiry guide Foucault's work: identifying the apparatuses to sift truth from falsities; and understanding the apparatuses through which subjects act towards themselves and others using those derived truths, eventually thereby creating a normative mode of behaviour (see for instance, Turner 37). It is along these lines that Foucault wrote the four-volume *Histoire de la sexualité.* In the second volume's preface, he explains that his objective to analyze sexuality as a historical singularity was "an effort to treat sexuality as the correlation of a domain of knowledge [*savoir*], a type of normativity, and a mode of relation to the self" (*Ethics* 199–200). As he adds, it was also along the same lines of this *savoir-pouvoir-sujet* framework that prior to *Histoire*, he wrote about "mental illness" in *Folie et Déraison*. In fact, this repurposing of methods, from an investigation into madness to a study of sexuality, later led queer theorists to study the subversive power of resignification, especially as it concerns sexual and gender identities, roles, and performances. In other words, this repurposing of methods, this resignification, later led theorists to re-signify "queer" from its colloquial/lexical usages— "strange, odd, peculiar,

[41] In an interview, "Table ronde du 20 mai 1978," by way of answering the question of why he sees the birth of the prison system as so important, Foucault insists that far from trying to universalize the particular, what he says are meant as "'propositions,' '*game-openings'* where those who are interested are invited to join in" (emphasis mine; *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984* 224)

eccentric"—to investigating it through genealogical research as a *verb,* a subversion of the *domain of knowledge* occupied by *heteronormative* sexuality and as a critique of its *correlative power-relations*.

Following Foucault's opening gun, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler genealogizes sexuality and gender identity, and by a subversion of the latter, she seeks to decenter heteronormativity.[42] Quoting from *Surveiller et punir*, she develops an analogy conducive to her discussion on the relations of gender and sexuality: If "the soul is the prison of the body," she quotes Foucault, what are the theoretical uses then of viewing gender as the prison-house of sex (184)? In other words, if the soul, as Foucault suggests, is that through which practices, discourses, and institutions operate through and on the body then sex ought to be understood "as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender" (10).

To genealogize gender is to subvert it, Butler contends, and to view it not as the causal origin of sex, but as "effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (xxxi). Essentializing identity categories do not, in this view, constitute gender. Sociopolitical regulation, what Butler calls "compulsory heterosexuality," operates through the body in the form of behaviours and actions, thus enforcing a kind of cultural performativity enacted through gender (24). It is important not to assume that by this Butler means to equate identity with performance; the performativity of gender, she argues, produces

[42] The term 'heteronormativity' was coined by Michael Warner in his *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993). Here, an analogous term Butler uses is "heterosexism" (44).

the illusion of identity.[43] This is the reason why she undermines the common grounds that identity occupies in feminist political discourses and activism (xxxii). One may ultimately argue that Judith Butler's most lasting influence on queer theory remains this critique of identity-based knowledges.

With Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer pivots on the same axis discussed by Butler—on the axis of gender identity—but it shifts in a different direction. Her definition of queer, as often quoted as it may be, will be useful to repeat in its entirety here to see how from strictly performative, as with Butler, the theory proposed by Sedgwick about gender identity developed into a transitive queer identity with radical potential:

> That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedoes, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or…people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such (Tendencies 7–8).

Three things stand out in this passage which are worth closer examination: (a) The departing moments – "lapses and excesses of meaning," referring to signifiers which fail to adequately meet the signifieds – are indicative of post-structuralist slippages of meaning. (b) Consequently, the "constituent elements of anyone's gender" are rendered unstable due to their vulnerability to such slippages, whether in the Lacanian sense where "an incessant

[43] See the first chapter of Gill Jagger's *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* for a more detailed account of Butler's correlation of gender identity and performance/performativity.

sliding of the signified under the signifier" creates slippages in gender identity (*Écrits* 117), or in the Derridian sense where the inherent indeterminacy of meaning, central to the absent presence of meaning, creates *différance* in gender identity (*Acts of Literature* 65). (c) Regardless, queer identity in both senses absorbs a transitiveness, which is central to Sedgwick's oeuvre. Her search for the etymology of "queer" – as *across* – speaks to her project for queer as transitive, one which she describes as "across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across 'perversions'" (vii). The radical potential this transitivity offers for queer identity studies has become a special focal point for later queer theorists.

B) The Intersectional Turn

a. The Queer Racial Other

Chief among those queer theorists was Sedgwick's student, José Esteban Muñoz. In his *Disidentification,* Muñoz propounds on an eponymous theory of gender identity that focuses on the interplays and transitions in queer identity and its incessant representations among the queer people of colour who use their coercive, marginal bodies as weapons to demonstrate the oppressive discourse of hegemonic cultures. This interplay, reminiscent as it is of the nebula of *différance*, seeks to capitalize on the transitiveness of gender identity – as discussed with Sedgwick – among the queer people of colour who strive to represent dominant culture in a different and deferred way. Their art of disidentifying – representing dominant culture in order to subvert it – Muñoz stresses, are "strategies of iteration and reiteration" bent on creating new worlds through their negotiation between "historical trauma and systemic violence" and working on, with, and against the dominant cultural form (196, 161).

To support his arguments, Muñoz casts a wide academic net, at the centre of which is Kimberlé Crenshaw and her concept of intersectionality, which was already 10 years old by the publication of *Disidentifications*. In 1989, Crenshaw penned a paper, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics," describing the interconnections between various forms of discrimination. Citing legal cases fought between black women and their employers, Crenshaw notes that due to the absence of legal precedence that would acknowledge that women can also be black, or that black people can also be women, these black women are subjugated to compounded disadvantages that the law has not identified and/or addressed (150). In other words, their intersections of sexual identity and racial identity subjects them to intersections of violence and misjustice. Since then, this theory/realization has led others to argue that such violence and misjustices are inherent and systemic, represented through law (as Crenshaw discussed) but also through and in art and cultural representations. A common early – even current – critique of Crenshaw's intersectionality was its emphasis solely on the disadvantages of people on multiple intersections, a focus that victimizes them, and takes agency away from them. Nevertheless, Crenshaw has repeatedly argued that intersectionality was first and foremost used as a tool "to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women". It was only with later theorists, she states, that recent applications were associated to it.

In *Disidentification*, Muñoz addresses both issues. He remarks that artistic performances, the such enacted by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Isaac Julien, Richard Fung, Vaginal Davis, Carmelita Tropicana, Ela Troyano, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, occur at the intersections of race *and* sex. By performing/being, these performers draw attention both to

the heteronormative status quo and the dominance of white queer identity, and as such, subvert them (199–200). By shedding a different light on the art of such queer people of colour, Muñoz operationalizes intersectionality; he locates an alternative space – disidentification – where queer of colour performances and identities intersect with a force capable of realizing a politically radical project: disestablishmentarian worldmaking.

The critique of queer identity politics takes a step further with Patrick E. Johnson's "From Black Quare Studies or Almost Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother" (2000). Arguing for a fresh perspective on queer studies in general, and queer of colour studies in particular, Johnson introduces quare studies, asserting that identity manifests itself in the flesh, and therefore, purports social and political consequences for those who live in that flesh – the frontiers of "embodied politics of resistance," as he puts it (4). With its suspicion of identity politics and emphasis on queer performance, queer theory disregards "the material realities of gay and lesbian of colour" (5); he asks, "What is the use of queer theory when it has no utility "on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or any place where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed where the body is the site of trauma" (6)? That is a rhetorical question, of course, but throughout the article, Johnson seems to respond to that challenge by maintaining that queer of colour identity and performativity are not mutually exclusive; for instance, black performers, such as documentarian Marlon Riggs, perform black queer through their positionality at the intersections of those repressed identities. In the African American vernacular (as with Johnson's grandmother among others), the black equivalent to queer is understood and pronounced as quare (/kwɛ(ə)r/). Both in its signifier and signified, quare refers to a different

queer: it defers queer away from white unspoken assumptions of queer and toward fulfilling its full radical political potential.

b. The Queer Transgender Other

The interpenetration of intersectionality and queer theory initially concentrated on the intersections of gay/lesbian and white-vs-black racial discriminations, as briefly outlined above. Among many queer theorists, the focus of queer theory on such binaries was suspect to a dichotomy paradox; concentration away from heteronormativity had produced, inevitably, other ways of thinking about heteronormativity and its binarity. Some of these theorists addressed the normativity that labelling these identity groups – gay/lesbian and black/white – led to and the sociopolitical matrices they created; among the pioneers, one can name Susan Stryker and Robert McRuer.

The first academic work to relate queer critical theory explicitly to transgender issues, Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Transgender Rage," underscores the importance of a radicalized transgender subjectivity in the intellectual discussions surrounding queer theory's paradoxical quandary with identitarian anti-identitarianism. With a title taken from when the monster speaks back at its creator Dr. Frankenstein, and borrowing from Butler's queer performativity, as well as Kristeva's notion of the abject and Althusser's concept of interpolation, Stryker identifies transexual bodies outside the normal, natural order, with voices at a location and locutionary position adept to understanding and speaking of the hegemonic normative and natural. That voice can only be heard as transgender rage, Stryker says. Defining transgender rage as "queer fury," they believe that it is "imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a

subject, a set of practices that precipitates [transgender] exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject" (253). As such, Stryker's transgender *raging* voice positioned as they locate it within queer fury becomes a call for transgender writers to think, speak, and write from their own position of sufferings, as the "basis for self-affirmation, intellectual inquiry, moral agency, and political action" (244). It is through such transgender performativity studies, they argue, that one can escape the hegemony of Lesbian and Gay Studies: by ascribing to gender a performativity that is cross-sectional, underlining the fluidity rather than the dichotomy of gender and sexual performance.

It seems reasonable to follow Stryker's inroad into queer theory. To define something through its binary opposite – especially when focusing on how that binary opposite, heteronormativity and heterosexualism, per se, rely on a dualistic mindset – inevitably creates a new mindset that relies on such dichotomies, but in reverse. As such, Stryker's implication to move away from understanding queer as an oppositional force seems valid. What is dubious is whether or not such a focus would diminish queer theory's activism-based, radical political potential.

c. The Queer Disabled Other

Robert McRuer addressed this dilemma in his notion of crip theory. In this first major work dedicated to the convergence of disability studies and queer theory, he argues that a coalition consisting of AIDS theory, queer theory, and disability theory may assist to realize the multiplicity of different bodies and the full spectrum of corporeal existences, while finding ways to oppose normativity. The radical potential that he offers revolves around the AIDS

epidemic. He begins by enumerating the ways in which people with AIDS, especially those who identify as queer, have been branded "impaired." Their voices have been repressed, their bodies have been demonized, their subjectivities patronized (91–3). Using the words of Paula Treichler, McRuer reiterates that people with AIDS have not only been subject to the viral epidemic but have also faced "an epidemic of signification" (221). Resisting victimization, however, they have been actively participating in this other epidemic by resisting such demonizations that ensues from calling them victims or patients of AIDS; they are, they insist, "people with AIDS" (222). Building on this, McRuer finds that queer activism ought to explicitly incorporate AIDS theory into its purview by recognizing the realities that queer people face, both from the epidemic itself and from its constructs maintained by society.

C) The Transnational Turn

a. The Queer Other on the Border

From the launch of the first queer theory conference (organized by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990), theorists, who now come to be known as queer theory pioneers, experimented with boundaries – crossing them, blurring them, underlining or undermining them – be they in interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, multilingual, and/or geopolitical forms. Almost always, the focus was on transgression. Among these early theorists, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, especially, viewed transgression as an act that has the power to circumnavigate dualistic thinking propagated by purist ideologies and maintained by the status quo, to overstep artificial boundaries, and to create new ways of worldmaking. Hailing homosexuals as "the supreme crosser[s] of cultures," she identifies *coloured* homosexuals in particular with having more knowledge of other cultures, since due to their location at the in-between, they may transfer

ideas between cultures, an act which, she says, portends a transgressive force (84–5). Nepantilism, a borrowed Aztec word "meaning torn between ways," is a concept she uses to develop her notion of what she calls the *mestiza* – the mixed race – consciousness. To be torn between ways, as the Chicanx are on the American-Mexican border, is a state that ought to be embraced, she suggests (78). This new Mestiza state(lessness) contains ambiguity because the borderlands themselves are ambiguous. In other words, as much as the Chicanx and their consciousnesses nebulously occupy the borderland geographically – torn between USA and Mexico – they are located therein conceptually too, and thus culturally, linguistically, and *consciously* torn between them (80). This is the fulcrum of Anzaldua's thesis: such transgressive consciousness in the mestiza is fluid; such mestiza is thus queer (i.e., across boundaries); such queerness is thus borderless; therefore, making it stronger than, say, purist racial ideologies, on the account that it is malleable. Written in 1987, the theses offered in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* gave direction to the burgeoning field of queer theory towards studies on the queer Global South, giving the field a transnational turn from its early stages.

Crossroads between queer theory and transnational cultural studies were initially located at the intersections of diasporic literature, as source literature for such studies were conveniently accessible to the theorists working in the West (see Munoz, Manalansan, Puar). In a special double issue of *Social Text* (1997), the editors[44] welcome such work by emphasizing that "queer" will live up to its full potential when it crosses boundaries. In the introduction to this double issue, "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender: An

[44] Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz and Trish Rosen.

Introduction" (1997), they primarily set out to position sexuality, race, and gender within a transnational scope, thus shunting the field beyond the domination of Western hegemonic discourses. Borrowing from Anzaldúa, they also focus on a queer critique, "conceived as a means of traversing and creatively transforming *conceptual* boundaries" (1; emphasis mine), traversing such concepts as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and diaspora. With regards to queer diaspora, they believe that queerness is not simply a dimension of minoritized sexuality, but one of the functions that shapes diasporic experiences.

b. The Queer Immigrant Other

In the same issue, David Eng supports that argument using queer terminology in the context of diaspora studies. He expounds on a view at which heart is the notion of statelessness and homelessness; he believes that when the queer immigrant has 'come out of the closet' of their home (as most often, due to several constraints, the two coincide) and find themselves outside of it, this being out is never a being 'in' another closet/home. Rather, as Eng puts it: "suspended between an 'in' and 'out' of the closet—between origin and destination, and between private and public space—queer entitlements to home and a nation-state remain doubtful too" (31). Therefore, in the same manner that immigrant diasporic experiences shape their queerness, Eng asserts, their queerness also conditions those diasporic experiences. In the context in question, Asian American Studies, he demonstrates what precedes with the example of Ang Lee's *Wedding Bouquet* (1993). A film about a gay Taiwanese immigrant who marries a woman from China in Manhattan to appease his parents, *Wedding Bouquet,* as Eng reads it, is a queer diasporic narrative that rethinks the domestic patriarchy of home in a global context; that reevaluates the correlations and identities of a queer Asian American and a Third World

Woman; and that understands this new stage of queer Asian American-ness as not quite 'fixed', and sees it instead to be conditioned and coopted (43–47). This is a demonstration Eng provides of the many tools that, when combined, queer and diaspora studies may offer.

c. The Post-9/11 Queer Other

By the early 21st century, Queer Diaspora had already become a much-scrutinized nebula of study, prominently featured in handbooks, monographs, and journals of queer theory, literary studies, area studies, etc. (see for instance, Manalansan; and Gopinath). With its acute awareness of the interconnections of migration, gender, and sexuality within the framework of diasporic narratives, queer diaspora sought the aid of postcolonial studies to discern the disentanglements integral to the interconnections mentioned above. The shared springboards of the two fields – queer studies and postcolonial studies – were conducive to forming this symbiosis. Postcolonialism introduced ways of looking into queer as the result of a negotiation between "queered" and "queerer" – the subjects and agents of queer. Queer theory muddled the boundaries between the subject of queer and the agent of queer by interrogating queer postcolonial narrative as a historical singularity, a domain of knowledge with correlative normative power, and as a mode of relation to the *embodied* self.

One of the main effects of such a focus was an acute awareness of the many pitfalls of the self-victimizing, even self-righteous tones, of early queer theory. By this time, queer theorists were problematizing queer in disparate forms, including but not limited to queer neoliberalism, rainbow capitalism, queer nationalisms, and the "war on terrorism" (2) to rescue the queer subject from religious fundamentalism (i.e., queer as excuse for war). In 2005, in the introduction of another double issue of *Social Text*, "What's Queer about Queer

Studies Now" the editors aimed to address these issues, building on the 1997 special issue, to ask, "What does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism […] immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights" (1–3)? A question to which the special issue aimed to respond by acknowledging the limits of queer epistemologies, investigating "the denaturalizing potential of queer diaspora," and examining the emergence of queer liberalisms (7). Central to all three was a renewed idea of queer studies that viewed sexuality as not the only thing signified by queer, but instead understood queer "as a political metaphor without a fixed referent" (1). Queer, therefore, no longer exclusively pertained to sexual or gender minority figures; questions of sovereignty, migration, refugees, citizenship, and the public sphere were added to the mix.

For instance, in the same issue, Jasbir K. Puar interrogates the resolutely secular Western queer liberal imaginary of sexuality as a figure that can only fathom a queer agential subject within the secular nation-state, like the U.S. This sexual exceptionalism, Puar argues, is the result of the collusion between queerness as a "sexually exceptional form of American sexuality," and of U.S. exceptionalism with its triumphalism of whiteness as a queer norm (122). Using Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Puar elucidates one way US sexual exceptionalism functioned to violent effect in the so called "war on terror" (125). While in *Orientalism,* Said identifies 19th-century European patterns of representing Arab identity as exoticized through hypersexualization, in the narratives surrounding the sexual terror scandal caused by the hypersexual interrogation techniques used on Abu Ghraib inmates, this exoticization of Arab/Muslim/Oriental sexuality functioned in reverse, through an othering that sees their sexuality as especially repressed and hyposexualized; this then became a pretext for the

'perfect' interrogation and torture (127). In other words, since oriental sexuality is viewed as essentially repressed, averse to man-on-man contact and such sexual 'deviances' as masturbation, this interrogation technique was thought to work best on extracting information from them; the fabricated orientalist narrative woven to exoticize worked, and as Puar adds, it was integral to effacing the hypersexual acts of American prison guards too (128).

To counteract this, Puar turns the tables. Divorcing queer from its Western regurgitations – fixated as those had been on certain settled notions of sexuality and gender – additionally, she tilts queer away from intersectional conceptualizations, toward a post-structural assemblage that comprises a more holistic understanding of the subject (more than simply, for example, a brown, cis-gendered, Third World male, etc.). Contrasting how the subject is understood in intersectionality theory, the subject in her reformulation is more than the total sum (plus an embarrassing etc.) of their identity markers; the subject is an assemblage which is neither linear nor stable (122). One example of this assemblage is the queer terrorist assemblage. Displaced and dispersed by the empire, these diasporic tortured queer figures, she argues, occupy a place, which is not a home, nor entirely outside of it. A space which occupies a temporality "always becoming both national and its antithesis," and which in doing so occupies a queerness which is outside the queer narrative of U.S. exceptionalism (134–5). The terrorists are queer because they occupy a terrorist assemblage: an assemblage of a terrorist that queers the narrative of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, due to the fact that (a) they uncover hidden queer orientalist biases towards them (as demonstrated in the previous paragraph), but also (b) because they demonstrate how the nation-state, arrogant of its queer liberalism, is capable of sexual torture, and is in fact guilty of it.

The Relevance of Subjectless Critique in Queer Theory

The apprehension of the mechanisms by which a normative queer is incorporated into neoliberal regimes of power were taken up again by Puar and Eng in 2020. They reiterate the views upheld by the editors of the 2005 *Social Text* issue that queer ought to be understood "as a political metaphor without a fixed referent," and expand upon it by introducing a critique that can withstand "[o]ne of queer studies' key theoretical possibilities: [i.e.,] the continuing interrogation of its exclusionary operations" (1). The subject in such a critique, or the critique of its lack thereof, is necessarily understood through a dialectic of Marxism and queer theory as a subject that is "opaque to itself" and has relations to unknowable and unknown others. This queer Marxist "subjectless critique" is predicated upon the acknowledgement that there is "no proper subject *of* or proper object *for*" queer studies, evidenced by how in the development of queer studies, emphasis has always been laid on those subjects that queer studies had excluded from its purview of queer (3): formerly, Black and women subjects, then trans, disabled, and indigenous subjects. In sum, the focus of subjectless critique is the "wide field of normalization as the site of social violence" towards those who are not yet fully coopted and incorporated into the neoliberal logic of normative queer (3).

Subjectless critique, therefore, is a critique of queer theory's practices of othering. It offers an approach to investigating the *traces*[45] that queer leaves behind, since it operates in a paradoxical sphere of investigating not only the potentials of moving away from ethnographic studies of the subject, but also the traces of a subject who is no more and how it can make a

[45] Trace as the "mark of the absence of a presence," as Spivak astutely puts it in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, and "the condition of thought and experience" (xvii-xviii).

resurgence: Specifically, (a) subjectless as those subjects that queer theory has disregarded in its purview of queer, as well as (b) subjectless as the disappeared material conditions "to produce subjects for and states of political representation" (Puar and Eng 16). Queer subjectless critique, as an investigation into queer traces – be they in forms of subjects excluded from queer, domains of knowledge heretofore hidden from view, or the revisiting, rereading, and retracing of queer theories established as canonical – has offered insight into the mechanisms by which erasure and social invisibility operates.

In what is now a canonical text in queer studies, *Fear of a Queer Planet,* Michael Warner lays the founding blocks of how queer theory can be subjectless: "Nervous over the prospect of a well-sanctioned and compartmentalized academic version of 'lesbian and gay studies,' people want to make theory queer, not just have theory about queers" (xxvi). Thus, he positions queer to interrogate 'regimes of the normal' rather than the heterosexual, which solely investigates sexual and gender relations. His *Fear of a Queer Planet* underscores the detachment of queer theory from conventional frameworks surrounding sexuality, notably through the rejection of a "minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (16). This primarily reflects queer theory's main critical stance: an oppositional position toward heteronormative ideologies that extends beyond mere acceptance or tolerance towards queer identities. The discussion surrounding "reprosexuality," described as the intertwining of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, and personal identity, exemplifies a broader social critique embedded within queer theory. For Warner, the choice of the term "queer" represents a resistance to regimes of the normal and challenges traditional binaries that hinder broader understanding and inclusion in societal constructs. Along these lines, the advocacy for a

"subjectless critique" emphasizes a form of analysis that transcends specific subject identities exclusive to queer, pushing for a more encompassing resistance against broad social norms.

The applicability of subjectless discourse has been considered in ethnic studies too, such as Asian American Studies and Indigenous studies, both long treated in the Western academy as scarcely "anything other than ('authentic') artifacts of an ethnography of the Other" (Chuh 18). In *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique,* Kandace Chuh presents subjectlessness as a conduit for carving out a "conceptual space" that accentuates difference by highlighting "the discursive constructedness of subjectivity" (9). She highlights the constraints on the liberatory potential inherent in subjectivity, indicating that a 'subject' is recognizable and capable of acting only by conforming to certain regulatory matrices, thus becoming an epistemological *object*. She adopts this framework of subjectlessness to critique and transcend the limitations tied to subjectivity, especially within the dynamics of representation and citizenship in the U.S. nation-state. Chuh underscores the inadequacy of subjectivity alone in remedying injustice and advocates for a critical examination of Asian American and Asian American studies as subject/objects within dominant paradigms. The notion of subjectlessness serves as a conceptual tool to challenge essentialist and identitarian assumptions, promoting what Chuh terms "a strategic antiessentialism" (10). It allows for a redefinition of the political, urging an exploration into the meanings and pursuits of justice, and challenges the essentialist frameworks through which terms like "Asian American" gain meaning.

Indigenous Studies is similarly "ethnographically entrapped within the project of studying Natives," Andrea Smith asserts, by which she means that the pursuit of full

subjecthood implicit in ethnographic research, which positions the indigenous to share their 'truths' is "already premised on a logic that requires us to be objects to be discovered" (*Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* 42). In addressing this "ethnographic entrapment," Smith shows that numerous indigenous scholars "call into question the assumption that Native studies should be equated with its object of study – Native peoples" (43). Therefore, some Indigenous scholars propose that Indigenous studies could explore various objects of study through distinct interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical formations. Smith explores queer theory for its potential to help Indigenous studies escape this predicament. She hints towards the queering of Indigenous studies to move beyond studying it through normalizing disciplines. She finds queer theory's anti-normative imperative in tandem with its turn to subjectless critique can help Indigenous studies escape its ethnographic entrapment, "by which Native peoples are rendered simply as objects of intellectual study and instead can foreground settler colonialism as a key logic that governs the United States today" (44). Moreover, she continues, such a move might demonstrate how "Indigenous studies is an intellectual project that has broad applicability not only for Native peoples but for everyone" (44). In sum, through subjectless critique, queer theory continues seeking new life, probing interconnections and dialogues with ethnic studies, such as Asian American and Indigenous studies.

Queer Indigenous Studies through Subjectless Critique

Particularly with Indigenous studies, queer subjectless critique provides incisive ways of looking at corporal erasure and social erasure in contexts not limited to the murders, disappearances, and statelessness of Indigenous peoples, but consequently also considering

the problems with their social and political representations too – non-representation, underrepresentation, misrepresentation – by studying the apparatuses behind this erasure. After all, social marginalization is rarely a cause in and of itself, but often symptomatic of systemic structural violence.

Mississauga Nishnaabeg academic Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes that "the force that has removed me from my land, it has erased me from my history and from contemporary life, and it is the reason we currently have thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women and Two Spirit/queer people in Canada" (*As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* 7). The force that has forcefully dispersed people, she states, is the one and the same force that is culpable of murder. With this, she divulges one major way by which this force operates: dispossession. In short, for the American Indigenous this dispossession of their lands has historically amounted to murder and disappearance. Subjectless critique and queer theory transform when in contact with indigenous studies, and together offer a critique of normativity, one aspect of which is how settler colonialism operates. It lays bare the entanglements between nation-state violence, erasure, land dispossession, dispersion, and the perpetuation of norms, which make all these possible.

Moreover, subjectless critique in queer theory not only investigates the disappeared material conditions to produce the subjects of erasure but it also incorporates the study of the disappeared material and immaterial objects of erasure too. Such critique in queer indigenous studies, for instance, looks beyond the tracking of traces of the disappeared queer indigenous subject – the subaltern – to a study of their domains of knowledge, which are hidden from

view (often deliberately so), and seeks to expose them. Indigenous "epistemologies, histories, stories, language, spirituality, legal systems, and artistic practices" are examples of such disappeared objects (Scudeler 81). In her essay, "Indigenous Queer Normativity," Betasamosake reminds the reader that when the colonizers settled, they first sought to eliminate what posed threats to "settler society, sovereignty, dispossession, and the project of colonization, colonialism, and assimilation" (126). Through her critique, she demonstrates how queer indigenous bodies were seen to perform the most extreme threats to the political order; consequently, their bodies as well as their histories and stories, which embodied "consent, diversity, variance, spiritual power, community, respect, reciprocity, love, attachment," were eliminated (Scudeler 81).

Such Indigenous subjectless critique helps us see that the disappeared material conditions to produce queer indigenous political representations are predicated on the possession and occupation of *land*, as the mode of relation of the Indigenous subject to itself is intricately tied to land. Glen Coulthard identifies this subjectivity as Indigenous land-connected practices he labels "grounded normativity" defined as "longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13). The objects of this 'grounded normativity,' encompass indigenous "epistemologies, histories, stories, language, spirituality, legal systems, and artistic practices" ("Fed by Spirits: Mamâhtâwisiwin in René Highway's New Song . . . New Dance" 2). This is one reason why, as discussed in the previous paragraph, dispossession from Indigenous lands has not only amounted to their corporal erasure, but also to their social erasure.

Dialectically, therefore, subjectless critique has also provided a means to connect Indigenous studies with queer theory. In particular, understanding Indigenous grounded normativity through subjectless critique is helpful to understand the tensions between queer and Indigenous and may also aid in linking the two organically – through their modes of production. On one hand, Indigenous modes of production have been described as "modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge" or grounded *normativity* (Coulthard 13); this normativity can be represented in this phrase by Simpson: "It is our Ancestors working to ensure we exist as Indigenous peoples, *as they have always done*" (emphasis mine, 20), because the present perfect tense creates a revisionist historically-assumed normativity of being. On the other hand, Queer studies, having almost always defined the field as an anti-normative field of study, resists normativity, yet never seems to be rid of it.

Looking at this impasse through subjectless critique, one may see how there is tension and contradiction within the term "grounded normativity" itself. Subjectless critique demonstrates that Indigenous experiential knowledges as land-connected practices is contradictory since the definition is based on a historical *lack*. By retracing this lack, one will understand that the reason for such contradiction has been "the cold rationality of market principles" (Coulthard 13), which has displaced the indigenous from their resource-rich lands, consequently dispossessing them also of a sense of self, deeply informed by the land which is now reconfigured and heavily extracted. In short, subjectless critique demonstrates that the state-market apparatus of accumulation by dispossession is the main cause of this tension in grounded normativity. Similarly, As raised in the 2005 *Social Text* double issue, queer theory itself has been defined through "a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations" (3). This

has been one of queer studies key theoretical promises. Therefore, through its development, queer studies have also defined themselves by their lack. Subjectless critique as a destabilizer of the subject matter of queer theory may appear as a level upon which queer and indigenous studies can meet.

Seeking this interconnection between queer and Indigenous studies, Jodi A. Byrd further problematizes the contradiction in "normative grounding" – the normative in grounded normativity – by stating that "the normative gesture of the so-normal-it-did-not-have a-name, the *as we have always done* past tense and present perfect temporality of indigeneity … itself erases and vacates that which has always been erased from and abjected in the deadly onslaught of colonialism" (118). In other words, by naming Indigenous land-based practices as a form of normativity, one participates in the same violence perpetuated by colonial normativity, as it revolves around a definition derived from colonialism. Instead, Byrd shifts grounded normativity towards an Indigenous queer *relationality*, a "grounded relationality," which she finds is already potent and present in Indigenous practices and literature (118). Situating this relationality from Marxist notions of relations of production to Donna Harraway's cyborg relationality, she finds that Coulthard's grounded normativity "resonates with and draws on existing definitions of relationality already in use by the field" of Indigenous studies (119). Byrd notes that notions such as "*complementary duality, kinship, community, and reciprocity*" have long been topics of study in Indigenous traditions (original emphasis 120). For instance, Deanna Helen Reder points to the fact that "Cree philosophy is based on the concept that everything is interconnected and *kisteanemétowin* is the recognition of these relationships" (45). With its emphasis on kinship, care, and the ethics of human relations, like indigenous philosophy of interconnectedness, queer relationality also points to

"an irreducible *we*-ness in human selfhood" as well as a project in world-making (Nikki Young 162). Through subjectless critique, the aforementioned disciplinary and definitional tension between and within queer and Indigenous studies provides fertile ground to begin an inquiry of the tensions, contradictions, and resistances between/within queer and other fields of studies and create a nebula for more organic interconnections, even with the continuing presence of tension.

Indeed, subjectless critique, as Andrea Smith notes, helps also to show that Indigenous studies can have broad applicability within the academy (45). One suggestion for further research as suggested by Byrd is how "indigeneity and queerness transform in conversation with and through global souths and beyond the white settler colonies" (121, note 1). The potentials that such symbiosis has to offer for global south studies ranges from understanding displacement and dispossession to unsettling fixed notions regarding the subject of diaspora studies in academia. Moreover, through subjectless Indigenous queer relationality, one may also examine the missing land-based interconnections and relations in other fields of study.

Toward a Muslim Queer Relationality

Subjectless critique is not without its limits, in the sense that there are limits to its subjectlessness. As Andrea Smith points out, such critique risks laying undue emphasis away from the agency of the subject; in other words, as a result of focusing on the disappeared material conditions for the political production/representation of the subject, subjectless critique may consequently define, for instance, the Indigenous *through* settler colonialism, and thus strip the queer subject of its political force despite and within the genocidal present. In other words, one of these limits is due to subjectless critique's proximity with "postidentity"

politics (43). As many critics have noted, postidentity politics "often retrenches white, middle-class identity while disavowing it," as it strips, for instance, racialized subjects or hyper/hypo-sexualized subjects of their bodies, their embodied expressions of agency (Sarita Echavez See; Hiram Perez; as cited in Smith 44). During the Trump presidency, the discussions around identity politics was put into sharper focus. For example, the Muslim Ban, the omission of transgender civil rights protections in health care, intensified racial tensions in places like Charlottesville, the unfolding of the #MeToo movement, restrictions on undocumented immigrants of colour, truncating the Affordable Care Act, and weakening Medicaid much to the detriment of people with visible disabilities, had scholars reexamine the dangers of ignoring identity politics, namely its intersectional violence. Therefore, as many have argued the political potentials of mobilizing resistance on the axis of identity.

I argue that subjectless critique needs to be trauma-informed and survivor-driven to reexamine how those who have been rendered subjectless are the ones for whom we need to explore the conditions for the resurgence of their political and legal representations; in other words, help them on their own terms. Our task, as Lila Abu Lughod, describes it in her book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is not to think for the people but to think with them – led by them, and with our source material based on their thoughts, actions, and desires. With my source material taken from queer Muslim life writings, my challenge is to think through a survivor-driven and trauma-informed subjectless critique, to ground my own critique in queer Muslim embodied lived experiences with the aim of identifying the conditions for the resurgence of their political representations. This approach necessitates recognizing and validating the embodied and emplaced narratives of individuals who are often overlooked within the dominant discourse but who also resist it. Rather than reifying the erasure instigated

by systemic structures of power, trauma-informed and survivor-driven subjectless critique can work to illuminate the complex intersections of identity, power, and resistance in the way these subjects express them through their own agencies: their thoughts, actions, and desires.

Through subjectless critique, Indigenous queer relationality has informed us of the dangers of defining the Indigenous through colonialism. Taking that as my cue, I question the validity of defining queer Muslims through what Mahdavi calls the three barriers to achieving democracy: "(a) nostalgic and essentialist nativism which appear in the different forms of tribal and religious fundamentalism; (b) right-wing and opportunist populism whose dependence on rentier politics and economics is shrouded in the veneer of pseudo-leftist slogans of social justice; and (c) the current neoliberal order which reproduces itself in a variety of local and national shapes and forms" (Mahdavi 89–112). Thinking through these Indigenous problematizations of subjectless critique, we can navigate the complexities that arise when examining the experiences of other marginalized communities, such as queer Muslims. By grounding my critique in queer Muslim embodied experiences and resisting the urge to define them solely through oppressive frameworks, I can better understand not only the disappearance of the conditions necessary for their political and legal resurgence, but also its resurgence. This survivor-driven, trauma-informed subjectless critique, which works in the intersection of queer relationality and Muslim modes of living, ultimately aims to illuminate an intricate assemblage of identity, power, and resistance, as queer Muslims have expressed it so far in their life writings. Empowering these individuals to express their agency, by taking a sharper look at how the first queer Muslim life writings of the 21st century understand identity, power, and resistance will contribute to transformative change. With this understanding, we can now turn to explore an example of queer Muslim representation within the context of Iran.

Between 2004 and 2006 in Iran, a magazine was published online, named *Majaleh-ye Electronick-ie Hamjensgarayan-e Iran (MAHA)*,[46] or in English, The Electronic Magazine of Homosexuals of Iran. This online magazine was the only one to exclusively publish of and about queer culture[47] from within Iran. For the first time in the Persian-speaking world, it also broached the topic of Muslim LGBTQ subjectivity in its 2nd issue, dated December 2004 / January 2005. The article bears the title "Muslim Homosexuals of Iran and Their Current Challenges," in which the anonymous author argues that while the term Muslim homosexuality appears paradoxical, Muslim homosexuals have always existed in Iran and throughout the Muslim world. The article begins by stating that despite the surface paradox, it is imperative to acknowledge that such individuals live among us today. The actions of the religious government, it argues, may have led many from the LGBTQ community to avoid religion in all its manifestations, but a considerable portion of homosexuals in Iran, despite oppression, remain steadfast in their faith. The article then makes this crucial claim: *The recognition of Muslim homosexuals not only lends richness to LGBTQ movements in Iran but also aids in modernizing religious perspectives*. It is essential, the article continues to argue, that rather than clinging to past interpretations, we look at Islam and its teachings through the lens of present human relations.

For example, the anonymous author problematizes the traditional interpretation of the main parts of Quran commonly used against homosexuality in Islam:

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[46] مجله الکترونیکی همجنسگرایان ایران (مها)

[47] the term queer had not yet been applied as broadly in Iran as it was already employed in the English-speaking world.

> The truth is that you will not find a verse in Quran that mentions homosexuals or other sexual minorities. The only excuse religious fundamentalists have in marginalizing queers is the Story of Lot. These extremists have wrongly insisted that God's wrath against the Tribe of Lot was due to their practicing homosexuality. This interpretation is hasty if not superficial. The reason is that it is quite extraordinary, in fact impossible, for all the men in a tribe to be exclusively gay. Secondly, all historical, sociological, demographical evidence and statistics point to the fact that, approximately only 10 percent of the people given societies practice homosexuality. Therefore, it seems more reasonable to assume that God's wrath was raged against the Tribe of Lot not because of their homosexuality, but because of their lack of hospitality, especially since guests are revered in Islam and for Allah. Moreover, in the Story of Lot (or anywhere else in the Quran), nothing is mentioned of female homosexuality; why is it then that in Muslim societies female homosexuality is banned? If the Story of Lot is to teach us anything, it is that homosexuality has always existed in human societies and as such cannot be a Western import.[48]

Through Indigenous subjectless critique, one can understand that such an argument, as well-intended as it seems, becomes inevitably deleterious to the lived experiences of queer Muslims. It defines the queer Muslim through scripture. The queer reinterpretation of the Quran cannot be entirely innocuous. Creating a Muslim queer normativity, as we have seen with the dangers of Indigenous queer normativity, perpetuates the violence and the invisibilities caused due to heteronormativity – be it of religious fundamentalist, colonialist, or neoliberalist origins. Moreover, it extracts of a theory of Muslim queer subjectivity in reaction to Muslim fundamentalism; rather, it defines it through fundamentalism. This definition of queer Muslimhood, as one that has always already existed, participates in the same discourse of normativity that facilitated the tortures and executions of queers in the name of Islam. I ask instead: What if, as Andrea Smith and Jodi A Byrd suggest, we learn from Indigenous studies about the risks associated with creating any queer normativity which would perpetuate and

[48] All following quotations, including this quote, are my translations from the original Persian.

ignore the violences caused due to heteronormativities? What if we consider moving towards a Muslim queer relationality, which instructed by Indigenous scholarship, would not solely rely on the form of argument underlying such phrases as "we have always been here" to legitimize the existence of such subjects as queers? What if instead we admit that these subjects are altogether distinct from the subjects in the present perfect sense: that they are indeed subjects in the present sense, aware of their pasts and potentials? What if Muslim Studies learns from Indigenous Studies how to navigate its queer problem through relations and relationalities?

What Is Muslim Queer Relationality?

I take my cue from the same crucial claim posited by the anonymous authors of the short-lived Electronic Magazine of Homosexuals in Iran: that acknowledging Muslim queers not only enhances the diversity of LGBTQ movements in Iran, but also assists in updating religious viewpoints. True; however, I shift the argument away from normalizing Muslim queer identities to be subject to diversifying LGBTQ movements or contributing to the redefinition of Islam. First, viewing such subjects instrumentally – instrumental to diversification – is dehumanizing. Second, to normativize their thoughts, actions, and desires through scripturalist revisionism that views Muslim queers monolithically is participating in the same vicious cycle of interpretations and reinterpretations of Islam. I argue that the existence of queer Muslims is not simply ancillary to societal well-being, but pivotal. Allocating such a role for current queer Muslims strips them of their agencies. Instead, I contend that though they are configured by the historical and geographical and all other factors that come between – the sociological and cultural violences, the racial and ethnic violences, the sexual and gender-

based violences, the class-based violences, among other factors – Muslim queers *still* retain their agencies, and some despite all odds express them through their life writings.

Within these contexts, and the framework of Muslim witnessness mentioned in the first chapter, I argue that Muslim queer relationality manifests itself politically, among other ways, in the form of Muslim witnessness, or shahada. As an ontological form of being predicated on bearing witness for the sake of others, this witnessness serves as a conduit for the expression and realization of "Erfan, Barabari, Azadi" (Spirituality, Social Justice, Freedom), what Shariati considers a condensation of Muslim relationality. In the first chapter, I argued that Shahada is at the heart of such relationality, as it is the way these notions crystallize among Muslims. As discussed, Abbas Manouchehri interprets Shariati's concept of spirituality as a form of civil spirituality. This interpretation suggests that such spirituality not only emerges from the principles of democratic equality and freedom but also bears a responsibility to actively foster and uphold these ideals for others. Manouchehri writes,

> 'Civil Spirituality[49],' serves as a theory of citizenship for our era and time. Within the interplay of this triad ['mysticism, social justice, freedom'], one can observe 'awareness, responsibility, and friendship' as essential for living well. That is: spirituality, social justice, and freedom are ontological constituents (the possibility of human existence) and awareness,

[49] My translation. In the original, spirituality appears as عرفان)erfan(, sometimes translated as Islamic mysticism, which as discussed in the first chapter is a form of spirituality seen across the Islamic faiths. Its main tenet is the the oneness of God – the belief that everything in the universe is a facet of God. The notion cannot be rendered faithfully into English through one term. I have opted for 'spirituality' instead of 'mysticism,' 'Sufism,' or even 'Gnosticism' here, due to the malleability of the term 'spirituality,' which spans spiritual practices across the Muslim faiths, not limited to Sufist and gnostic beliefs.

> responsibility, and friendship are normative or ideal implications arising from this ontology, directed towards well-being ("Shariati and Civil Spirituality").

In parallel, shahada or Muslim witnessness translates to the 'ideal implication arising from the ontology' of Muslim queer relationality. In queer Muslim memoirs, we can see how through spirituality, or what Manouchehri calls *consciousness derived from a theist relation to the world*, Muslims take it upon themselves to enact their responsibility of bearing witness for their fellow queer Muslims, and in this way, purport larger social freedoms.

In subsequent chapters, the focus will be on examining memoirs by queer Muslims of color in North America, composed in English. This emerging subset of literature is part of the broader category of creative works by queer Muslims of color, a relatively new but expanding field. A notable aspect of this genre is its use of autobiographical elements, which is prevalent even in works that are primarily fictional. Examples include Abdellah Taïa's *L'Armée du salut* which parallels his own life experiences, and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*, which has autobiographical undertones.

The choice to study works written only in English is purely pragmatic. Openly queer Muslim memoirs written in other languages are few and far between. Secondly, my area of focus is North America, more specifically, United States of America and Canada. From the COVID-19 pandemic on, North America has witnessed a surge in the publication of such memoir. Thirdly, English serves as a common linguistic bridge, enabling these works to reach a broader, more diverse audience. This accessibility is crucial in the context of queer Muslim literature, as it transcends cultural and national boundaries, allowing for a wider dissemination

of Muslim witnessness. After all, as Chinua Achebe has noted, for good or ill, English has more currency and enjoys farther reach (Achebe 345).

During the 21st century, a significant number of memoirs by queer Muslim authors have been published. This array includes works by both new and renowned writers, such as *A Sinner in Mecca* by Parvez Sharma, *Angry Queer Somali Boy* by Mohamed Abdulkarim Ali, and *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H. This dissertation will primarily delve into *Hijab Butch Blues*, analyzing its portrayal of Muslim queer relationality. The work will be scrutinized for its interaction with Islamic traditional texts like the hadith and The Quran to investigate how it navigates the intersection of Muslim identity and queerness. Fundamentally, these analyses contribute to an important inquiry in Queer Muslim Studies: The discussion of what makes up queer Muslimhood.

In her memoir, *Hijab Butch Blues*, Lamya H intertwines vignettes from her life as a queer Muslim with stories from the Quran. The memoir is structured around chapters dedicated to a prophet or a religious story, much like how the Quran is organized in surahs. These are accompanied by Lamya's personal reflections and interpretations of these stories. These reinterpretations guide her understanding of herself and how to navigate the world around her. In short, she reads the Quran queerly. Lamya shares her journey of self-discovery, beginning with her move from South Asia to the Middle East in her youth and later to New York City. She touches upon experiences common to many queer Muslims, such as the dilemma of coming out and the concept of 'inviting in' as a way of redefining openness about one's queer identity. By bearing witness to her struggles, she highlights themes of queerness, family, belonging, and the search for a community that accepts and understands her authentic

self. She writes the memoir to "be birthed into a world" that is more just. I believe what is central to the memoir is that Lamya H is making the case that the *Quran* is Prophet Mohammad's memoir, and *Hijab Butch Blues* is hers.

In conclusion, the conditions for the resurgence of Muslim queer political representations, can only be fulfilled if the agency of the subject is taken into consideration. It is important to shift one's scope away from normativity towards the embodied thoughts, actions, and desires of the subject. A survivor-driven and trauma-informed subjectless critique, as inspired by Indigenous queer relationality, ultimately aims to illuminate how queer Muslims navigate their identity through racial, gender, religious, and class power dynamics. Queer Muslim resistance is steeped in the understanding of the intersectionality of violence and the interdependence of all individuals within the queer Muslim community. Defined as such, Muslim queer relationality, has recently found expression in queer Muslim life writings. Empowering these individuals to express their agency, by taking a sharper look at how the first queer Muslim life writings of the 21st century understand identity, power, and resistance will contribute to transformative change. In fact, even if our objective is the resurgence of queers *in Islam*, this is predicated on reconstituting a Muslim selfhood for the present, not solely based on scripturalism but based on the current practices of queer Muslims. These practices are represented in their life stories, the topic of discussion of the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Lamya H's Hijab Butch Blues: Quran as a Trauma-Informed Survivor-Driven Call to Action

The title of Lamya H's memoir, *Hijab Butch Blues* (hereon *HBB*), is taken from Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel, *Stone Butch Blues* (hereon *SBB*). Feinberg's novel poignantly captures the grim realities and resilience of the North American trans community during the AIDS pandemic—a period of significant social and political upheaval for the LGBTQIA+ community. At first glance, therefore, it might appear that *HBB* will directly offer historical analogies between the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community of that era, and the intersectional struggles faced by queer hijabi Muslims today. Yet, that is not the case; the memoir is entirely from Lamya H's life, with very little that deviates from that. In the disclaimer that appears on the copyright page, it reads,

> "Hijab Butch Blues is a work of memoir. It is a true story based on the author's best recollections of various events in her life. In some instances, events and time periods have been compressed or reordered in service of the narrative and dialogue approximated to match the author's best recollections of those exchanges. Names and identifying details have been changed" (i)

As such, the memoir claims to draw inspiration solely from the life of an author who writes under the pseudonym, Lamya H.[50] It is written mostly chronologically with very minor departures from this timeline. It neither relies on fictionalized elements (other than the allusions to Quranic figures, which are not deemed to be entirely fictitious), nor is it embellished with illustrations, and/or other literary devices. Instead, it maintains a straightforward, honest narrative style, focusing on the authentic recounting of Lamya H's personal experiences and reflections mostly in the order she experienced them.

[50] Lamya H explains the reasons behind her writing under a pseudonym in several parts of the book; one main reason given is for the protection the pseudonym provides, not for the punishment it could incur. I will discuss these reasons in more depth during the course of this chapter.

Yet, Lamya H resists mundanity. By vividly describing certain events from her life, she extracts applicable questions on sexual, gender, racial, class, and religious issues, examining the relations between these critically. That is, she uses an intersectional feminist lens to describe how she was discriminated against within and without her Muslim community: how by simply occupying the intersection of various identities, she was subject to compounded violence caused by, among other things, compounded discriminations. For example, she raises the issue of racial and class discrimination within the Muslim community while recounting a story from her childhood about lighter-skinned Arabs who would refuse to play with her as a child not only because of her darker skin complexion but also because she belonged to a poorer family. Or, outside the Muslim community, she reveals how she was often targeted for her skin colour but also her hijab. Without much to embellish her language, *HBB* reads as a strikingly candid testament to intersectional violence, not only of Lamya H, but also of the queer Muslim community.

The title aside, another major inspiration she draws from Leslie Feinberg's novel is her motivation to write the novel itself. In the Afterword of the 10th Anniversary Edition of the novel's publication, Feinberg writes, "But with this novel I planted a flag: Here I am—does anyone else want to discuss these important issues? I wrote it not as an expression of individual 'high' art but as a working-class organizer mimeographs a leaflet—*a call to action*" (305, my emphasis). Lamya H regenerates the discussion by writing that her memoir is her form of worldmaking for herself and "people whom I love, whom I fight alongside by marching at protests, fundraising for bail funds, organizing queer Muslim events that build community" (278) – above all, as a form of struggle or fight, which is as much personal as it is collective. In fact, it might read as a personal fight that is too shy to expand to others but

actually means to. She hopes like-minded individuals and allies, fellow queers, fellow Muslims, and fellow queer Muslims would take up the fight.

She begins introspectively: the preface begins with a verse from *The Quran*:

> *"And when Ibrahim said, "My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead."*
> *[Allah] said, "Have you not believed?"*
> *[Ibrahim] said, "Yes, but just that my heart may be satisfied.*
> *The Quran* 2:260*"*

"This," begins Lamya H, "is my favorite verse in the Quran" (*HBB* ix).

She draws a connection between her own spiritual journey and Ibrahim's, asserting, "I, too, have questions for God" (ix). In this Quranic narrative, Ibrahim (Abraham) seeks a tangible sign from God to solidify his belief in resurrection, not out of doubt but to soothe his heart[51]. Lamya H mirrors this sentiment: for Abraham, the subject of doubt is belief in the afterlife as faith; for Lamya H doubt is how she begins a memoir, a way of being, which in earlier chapters, I described as the manifestation of shahada, Muslim Witnessness. Like Ibrahim, she seeks solace. Further into her memoir, she revisits this inner moral dilemma, using it as a lens to examine wider societal ethical challenges. She suggests that if society aims to free itself from injustice, it must first acknowledge and then address these instances of doubt, which are inherent in all forms of resistance, particularly due to the mental resolve required to persist in the face of adversity. Lamya H expresses her yearning for a world that is "kinder, more generous, more just" – a vision she describes as an "unattainable utopia" (279). She argues that despite its seeming unattainability, this ideal world is worth striving for and defending.

[51] Verse 260 continues as follows: After Abraham asked God for a miracle demonstrating that there is afterlife, he was asked commanded to take four birds, tame them to him, then put a portion of them on every hill and call them. Ibrahim did as he was told, and when he called the birds, they came flying to him, showing that God can indeed bring the dead back to life.

Lamya H believes that when individual and collective efforts align with this imperative "call to action," it reinforces the belief that endeavors toward justice are not only worthwhile but also essential.

The resemblance of Lamya H's undertaking to that of an Abrahamic prophet, summoned by God to institute justice on Earth, is not coincidental but rather a deliberate narrative choice. In this memoir, Lamya H purposefully crafts parallels between her own experiences and those of the scriptural prophets. Through these comparisons, she explores alternative ways to manifest justice, particularly in the context of groups who more often bear the brunt of compounded forms of oppression and violence due to their overlapping identities, intersectional minorities. Lamya H's narrative thus becomes a reflection on how to uphold the rights and meet the responsibilities of such communities, advocating for a form of justice that is acutely aware of and responsive to these intersectional dynamics. In doing so, she extends the traditional role of an Abrahamic prophet, mostly reserved for men, to a contemporary setting, interpreting and applying age-old principles of justice to modern struggles and social issues.

On an intertextual level, while the memoir rarely alludes to other written works, its frame narrative is taken entirely from *The Quran*. The chapters are titled as though they are surahs from the Quran; most titles, in fact, are eponymous[52]. The first chapter, for instance, is "Maryam," same as the title of the 19th surah of *The Quran*, which describes the life of Mary, mother of Jesus. Lamya H's "Maryam" uses the surah as inspiration to perform queerness; the first chapter of her memoir, and quite literally her life, is a sexual commentary both on *The*

[52] The chapters are: "Part I: 'Maryam,' 'Jinn,' 'Allah.' Part II: 'Musa,' 'Mohammad,' 'Asiyah.' Part III: 'Nuh,' 'Yusuf,' 'Hajar,' 'Yunus'".

Quran and on her own life. Other chapters follow form. The entire memoir, as such, can read as commentary on *The Quran*, importantly, as one that is interpreted through Lamya H's lived experiences.

The memoir is organized in three parts, each containing three to four chapters. The first part is an exploration of race, sex, gender, class, and religion through *The Quran*. In this part, she challenges normative interpretations of *The Quran* by asking questions, which many within her Muslim community found "blasphemous," (71), such as what if Mary is a dyke (23)? And, what if visibly racial minorities are the jinn of the human world (58)? And, what if Allah's pronoun is 'they' (72)? While the first part might read as an altogether personal take of *The Quran*, in the second part, she propounds on a theory of the "Islamic closet," and explores the journey Quranic/Biblical figures have taken as a journey of coming out of their own confining closets: Musa (Moses) comes out with God's message to the pharaoh; Mohammad comes out with God's message, importantly, to his own family *first,* and then to other tribes; Asiyah, the wife of the Pharaoh of Exodus, comes out from under the Pharaoh's hold to live her own life in peace. Lamya H identifies with each of these figures, and implies that her queerness is an Allah-given gift, which she should pride in, implicating that *The Quran* inspires one to come out. The third and final part of the memoir is an investigation into queer Muslim relations. It is about what comes after coming out. For people of the diaspora, like herself, Lamya H equates coming out of the closet to coming out of home countries. She identifies *The Quran* as a central point – a text which helps create queer kinships outside of the closet; not only it inspires one to come out, but it is also a text queer Muslims can create kinships around – and as such, her Muslim queer relationality revolves around *The Quran*. Again, she finds inspiration in Quranic figures: Nuh (Noah), who searched for his people after

becoming alienated from them; Yusuf (Joseph), who was abandoned and struggled through loneliness to find his people; Hajar (Abraham's wife), who was exiled, like so many in the diaspora today; and finally Yunus (Jonah) who preferred to be swallowed by a whale than to live among people who would not accept him as who he was.

Finally, another major claim of *HBB*, albeit implied, is that *The Quran* is autobiographical. It is inspired by God, recounted by Prophet Mohammad through the course of his life from the age of 40 until his death – Mohammad's memoir. This is not a novel suggestion in the Muslim world of exegeses. Mohammad's life is always incorporated in the interpretations of *The Quran*. The surahs are most often identified as whether they were revealed to him in the city of Mecca or in the city of Medina.[53] Categorization of surahs into Maki (revealed in Mecca) or Madani (revealed in Medina) is partially achieved by identifying the tone, the subject matter, the content, and form of the surahs, signifying that these categories vary, partially because they were revealed and recited by a person, like any other, whose temperament, problems, and concerns, differed depending on given circumstances. Orthodox interpretations of *The Quran* revolve around the place and time of revelation, among other issues. Most translations of *The Quran* are complemented by suggestions of,[54] or indicators to the verse's time and place of revelation. Sunni and Shia sometimes differ in their understandings of Islam, by their different interpretations of where, when, and why the verses were revealed, therefore, mainly diverging upon their historical understanding of Mohammad's life.

[53] There are 21 surahs whose exact place and time of revelation is disputed.

[54] Most often these suggestions appear between brackets.

Lamya H simply takes this understanding of *The Quran* further. She implies that the fact that Mohammad is addressed in *The Quran* by God lends not less but more credibility to the claim that the book is in fact Mohammad's memoir. For instance, Mohammad is sometimes told not to fret about a possible negative outcome. Lamya H centralizes references to Mohammad's emotions – that Mohammad has emotions. One example mentioned is how Sura Ta Ha begins:

> *"We have not revealed [these verses] to cause you distress*
>
> *But as a reminder [to do good] for those in awe [of God]*
>
> *A revelation from the One Who created the land and the skies*
>
> *[From God, Who is] the Most Merciful . . .* (20:1–5)*"* (128).

In Lamya H's interpretation of *The Quran*, it is integral to account for the human qualities of Mohammad, his feelings and lived experiences. Therefore, she reads the Quran as the chronicle of Muhammad's life and faith journey. Additionally and importantly, *The Quran* is made up of rituals that are to be practiced. Therefore, as *The Quran* is Mohammad's memoir, so is *HBB* Lamya H's *Quran*, because it is how she understand the world through her own bodily-experienced, still, divine revelations – usually in the form of realizations of her own identity, and importantly, how she enacts on these realization with regards to her responsibilities to others. In a chapter titled "Muhammad" (also the title of the 47th surah of *The Quran*), she writes that "I am twenty-one when I come out to myself as queer, when I receive something akin to a *wahi* [revelation] of my own" (121). Lamya H personalizes and humanizes the religious text, presenting it not just as a divine guide but also as a narrative closely related to individual understanding and experience. Her reading of *The Quran* through the lens of her own life is reading *The Quran* through Mohammad's life.

In what follows, I will describe how one can read this memoir not only as a reader-oriented interpretation of *The Quran*, but as a pragmatic Quran-based queer philosophy of life: a queer relationality expressed through shahada. It is important to note that the author's queer re-reading of *The Quran* is not centred on queer theory. In fact, the memoir is devoid of explicit references to any theory except Lamya H's own experiences as an observant Muslim queer of colour. From these experiences, she extracts a theory, which challenges both the Western homonormativity of the concept of "queerness" and heteronormative interpretations of *The Quran.* I will now provide a commentary on this theory by looking at how it contributes to Muslim feminism, Islamic studies, and queer theory, and how the discourses emanating from those discourses may contribute to hers.

First Part: Quran Queerly

As discussed in the first chapter, Islamic feminism and Muslim feminism characterize two ends of the spectrum of how feminism is practiced in relation to Islam. The former, as in the work of Asma Barlas, mainly engages with traditional Islamic texts to ultimately enshrine women's rights into Islamic law, what I defined as an apologetic hermeneutics of Islam. The latter as exemplified by Raja Rhouni, advocates for a "post-foundationalist" approach to Islam, critiquing Islamic feminism for its selective engagement with *The Quran* or other canonical texts and advocating for a more holistic and less essentialist approach to Islamic texts. Because it does not cling to the idea that Islamic texts (especially *The Quran*) are inherently egalitarian in the modern sense of the notion, this perspective, in fact, emphasizes the need to address the androcentric discourse of *The Quran*. Rhouni's critique extends to the methodology of Islamic feminism, urging a move away from producing mystifying scholarship about Islam and instead focusing on deconstructing prevalent approaches to *The*

Quran – in other words, engage in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading, in the true meaning of the word "repair". Rhouni's approach seeks to rejuvenate Islamic thought by reevaluating gender in Islam using a blend of new and traditional analytical tools, thereby contributing to the ongoing discursive tradition of feminism in Islam.

In this light, Lamya H's memoir can be seen as an extension of this post-foundationalist / post-Islamist approach. Her narrative does not shy away from addressing the complexities and ambiguities within Islamic texts regarding gender and identity. Instead, it presents a nuanced exploration of these themes, reflecting an ongoing conversation that merges traditional Islamic thought with contemporary feminist perspectives with her own bodily lived experiences as a working-class brown immigrant queer hijabi woman. Lamya H's work, thus, stands as a testament to the evolving nature of (post)Islamist feminist discourse, contributing to a broader understanding of gender within the Islamic tradition and paving the way for further discussions on post-Islamist queer theology. It is along these lines that Lamya H provides her commentary on the freedom of sexual expression, gender expression, and racial expression in her chapters on Mary, the jinn, and Allah, respectively.

The Dyke Mary, Mother of Jesus

The body of this Quranic surah is dedicated to a particular moment in the life of Mary, her immaculate conception and virgin birth of Jesus. In verses 16 to 30, *The Quran* narrates the story of Maryam (Mary), who, after retreating to a secluded place, is visited by an angel announcing the birth of her son, Isa (Jesus), in a miraculous event, as she is a virgin. Maryam, although initially astonished, accepts the divine message. During the delivery, she endures significant pain and, in her anguish, wishes she had died and been forgotten. However, she is comforted by a voice (which is understood to be Allah's) guiding her during this ordeal. Upon

giving birth to Jesus and returning to her people, she faces harsh accusations because of her previously known chastity. In a miraculous defense, the infant Jesus speaks from his cradle, affirming his role as a servant of Allah and as a prophet.

From these verses, Lamya H picks out the one verse that is only about Mary and no other men: "'*And the pains of childbirth [of Isa] drove her [Maryam] to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten' (19:23)*" (7). From this, Lamya H extracts a theory of the closet and queer erasure. First, as with every chapter named after a prophet or religious figure, she identifies with the figure; or rather, she impersonates the figure, finding analogies between their experiences and hers. As she finds it strange, verging on the blasphemous, for a holy figure, such as Mary, to want to die, she probes deeper. As a closeted queer Muslim, the erasure she suffers in her conventional Muslim community makes Lamya H to similarly yearn to die and disappear. Recounting a party that she was invited to at 14, she recalls how she thought she could never have fun: "The only way I could have fun at this dinner party is if I wasn't here, so I decide to make that happen. I spot a mirror opposite the wall, where everyone else in the reflection is talking, eating, happy. I position myself near a corner of the reflection and slowly edge myself out. Slowly … no longer in the reflection and the scene is intact" (11). She finds relief to find herself invisible, because she could no longer meaningfully belong to the community.

Lamya H argues that the Maryam of *Quran*, similarly, could not belong, as much because of her physical pains, as her incapacity to cope with people who would taunt her, calling her "unchaste" (21). This comparison brings Lamya H to this part of the sura: "*He said, 'I am only the messenger of your Lord to give you [news of] a pure boy [Isa].' She said, 'How can I have a boy while no man has touched me…' (19:17-19)"* (21) Lamya H asks: Why

does *The Quran* insist on describing Mary as a woman that no man has touched? Lamya H rejects the common conventional interpretation that her refusal to mingle with men was due to her commitment to chastity, or "*taqwa*".[55] Instead, she argues that the reason *The Quran* says no man has touched Maryam is because Maryam does not find men sexually appealing. Ultimately, the 14-year-old Lamya H comes to the conclusion that "Maryam is *something,* somehow like me (24): … Maryam is a dyke" (23–4). Elated from the discovery to find that there are other women like her in *The Quran*, she proclaims that "I was 14 the year I realized I'm gay," (16) "I am fourteen the year I read Surah Maryam. The year I choose not to die. The year I choose to live." (26). As such, Lamya H recounts that from a very early age, *The Quran* had become her refuge, a site of comfort, albeit also a site of contention. In her youth, Lamya H boldly challenges conventional, partriarchical and homophobic interpretations, forging her own understanding that resonates more deeply with her personal experiences and those of people like her. This self-crafted perspective seeks to offer an interpretation that acknowledges and validates her own journey and the journeys of others who share similar life experiences.

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[55] *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*, defines taqwa as: "A crucial Islamic concept," signiyfing "God-consciousness and the state of being 'God-fearing,' and, by extension, 'piety,' with which it seems to have a partially comparable semantic history. Taqwā and its derivatives occur more than 250 times in the Qurʾān. It has been rendered variously as: fear, God-fearing, godliness, piety, God-consciousness, right conduct, righteousness, virtue, warding-off-evil, and wariness. A survey of its usage in the Qurʾān indicates that taqwā is often paired with faith, goodness, justice, fairness, equity, guidance, truthfulness, perseverance, sincerity, purity, reliance on God, obedience to God, fulfillment of promises, and generosity. Taqwā is seen as a condition of God's rewards for good deeds. Women as well as men are enjoined to have taqwā; and good treatment of women by men in the context of marriage is seen as a sign of taqwā"

The narrative in *Hijab Butch Blues* takes on an exploration of queerness through the prism of the Quranic story of Maryam. Lamya H's interpretation is not a mere surface-level engagement with the text; it is a deep, personal excavation into the layers of meaning that resonate with her own lived experience as a queer Muslim. Her focus on Maryam's moment of despair – her wish for oblivion at the palm tree – is not just about identifying with the pain and alienation. It is an act of locating oneself within a tradition that seems to offer no space for such identification. By dwelling on the verse where Maryam laments her own existence, Lamya H ventures into a territory that is often understudied but taken up by queer Muslim memoir across the gender spectrum: Lamya H believes that a queer re-reading of *The Quran* is not unnatural; nor is it difficult or forced, if it resonates with your own life – an embodied reparative hermeneutics of *The Quran*.

Lamya H's reading of the story of Maryam never shies away from the difficult questions regarding gender justice in *The Quran*. In this sense, it contributes to the Muslim feminist "post-foundationalist" approach based on the resistance to apologetic readings of *The Quran*. However, neither does it surrender to automatic refusal or engages in paranoid reading practices that have ceased to be critical. This is what Sedgwick would term "reparative reading:" the multitude of methods by which individuals and groups manage to derive nourishment from the elements of a culture - even from a culture that has frequently expressed an intention not to support them (150).

A) Are Racial Minorities the Jinn of the Human World?

The second and third chapters of the first part of *HBB* are titled, "Jinn" and "Allah". Unlike other chapters which revolve around a Quranic figure, these two deal with non-humans of *The Quran*. The second chapter concerns the entity of the jinn, especially the surah dedicated to

them in *The Quran* [56]. The Arabic word "jinn" (جن) originates from the three-letter root (ج-ن-ن, j-n-n), which primarily connotes to cover, conceal, or hide. This root is indicative of the essential characteristic of the Jinn, their invisibility or hidden nature from human perception. The term Jinn is plural, with the singular being "Jinni" (جني). Cognate words from the same root include "jannah" (جنة), meaning garden or paradise, signifying something concealed with lush vegetation, and "junoon" (جنون), denoting madness or insanity, possibly referring to a state where normal perception is hidden.

In Sura Al-Jinn (72nd chapter of *The Quran*), the Jinn are depicted as sentient beings, created from a smokeless flame, and like humans, possess free will, allowing them to choose between good and evil. This Sura narrates the encounter of a group of Jinn with the prophetic message of Islam, leading to their belief and acknowledgment of *The Quran*'s truth. It

[56] The entry on "Jinn" in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia* read: "The Arabic term jinn means 'invisible beings.' The jinn are sentient beings who are composed from a subtle matter. Before Islam, they were worshiped as gods, as tutelary deities, or as spiritual protectors not only in the Arabian Peninsula but also in neighboring areas, such as the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. Islam incorporated them into the new religion and changed their status from gods to supernatural beings that could be either good or evil. In fact, Islam is the only one of the three monotheistic religions to address its message to both human beings and jinn. Muslims accept the existence of the jinn as part of their faith. The most important source for understanding the concept of the jinn in Islam is the Qur'an, which strongly condemns the worship of the jinn by the Arabs before Islam and their search for protection from them (72:6). In Qur'an verses 15:26–7 and 55:14–5, there is mention that they are created from 'scorching winds' and 'a smokeless fire,' and it is also said that they are like humans in that they are rational beings formed of nations (7:38). In fact, the jinn are always addressed in the plural. The Holy Book points out also that both jinn and humans are called to worship God (51:56)" (El-Zein 420)

emphasizes the universality of *The Quran*'s message, applicable not only to humans but to all sentient beings capable of moral judgment, including Jinn. Sura Al-Jinn contributes to the Islamic understanding of the unseen world, illustrating the existence of beings beyond human perception, yet bound by the same moral and spiritual laws. It serves as a reminder of the diverse yet interconnected nature of creation and the comprehensive scope of divine guidance and judgment in Islamic cosmology.

In the context of Sura Al-Jinn, the intrinsic meaning of concealment or invisibility inherent in the root word ج-ن-ن is pivotal. As mentioned, the Arabic root not only gives rise to the word "jinn" but also to other cognates with related meanings. A pertinent example is the word "*Ijtinan*" (اجتنان), derived from the same root, which connotes the act of covering, concealing, or rendering oneself invisible. This word appears in various contexts in *The Quran*, often linked to the idea of concealment or protection. One illustrative verse is *Quran* 27:52, where the word is used in the context of destroyed homes, signifying their abandonment and subsequent concealment from sight. Sura Al-Jinn contributes to the Islamic understanding of what is invisible to the human eye does not cease to exist. It illustrates the existence of beings beyond human perception, yet bound by the same moral and spiritual laws. It serves as a reminder of the Islamic belief that creation is naturally diverse (with visible and invisible elements) yet interconnected.

This metaphorically resonates with the thematic elements in Lamya H's memoir, where the author navigates the dual concepts of invisibility and hypervisibility in relation to minority racial groups. In this chapter, Lamya H makes the case that just as the Jinn, by their nature, remain unseen and concealed, only becoming shockingly conspicuous upon their rare manifestations, minority groups often experience a similar dichotomy. They frequently face

societal invisibility or marginalization, yet, paradoxically, can also be subjected to intense scrutiny and hypervisibility, especially when their presence challenges or disrupts prevailing norms. The chapter uses jinn as metaphor to investigate racism both as it concerns race and as it concerns gender from an intersectional perspective.

Like any child born into a Muslim family, Lamya H's first encounter with the concept of jinn was through stories recounted about them. She first learns about Jinn through the Disney-animated film, *Aladdin* (1992). Later, she learns from her aunt that Jinn are part of her own culture. Therefore, the figure of the Jinn which has omnipresence in her own culture as well as outside it, piques her interest. Frequently through her life, the notion of the jinn returns to her. At the age of nine, an event makes her realize that she shares similarities with the jinn. After figuring out that classmates and children from lighter-skinned Arabs of the community[57] treat her differently, deliberately ignoring and refusing to play with her, she reaches the conclusion: "In this country, our brown skin makes us invisible, like jinn" (34). She wants to bring attention to the fact that racial discrimination and segregation is a reality that exists in this Arab country.

Lamya H notes that in this country, "race is explicitly class: white Americans and Europeans are paid the most and hold the most prestigious jobs, followed by the light-skinned Arabs in middle management with South Asians holding mostly office and menial jobs" (39). In the hierarchies of intersectional discrimination, browns are rendered lowlier, for the fact

[57] Lamya H does not reveal which city or even country this story takes place in. About the setting: We are informed that Lamya H was born in a Southeast Asian country. Her family then migrated to an unnamed Arab city in the Middle East. This is where this part of her life takes place. Later, she receives a scholarship from a US university and moves to the US, where she lives today, in New York City.

that they are also poorer. As such, they are rendered invisible, like a driver, servant, or cleaning person, and like jinn in Lamya H's analogy.

Lamya H recounts one manifestation of intersectional violence incurred on people of colour in their homelands: invisibility. Calling it "the ultimate objectification," bell hooks views invisibility a "function of institutionalized racism, sexism, and class exploitation" (bell hooks and Cornel West 151). Part of the reason behind this, as Angela Davis describes it, is that what requires visibility is the "product of the labour," not the labourer (Angela Davis 233.). The labourer will only be noticed when there is an interruption in the production of labour. Lamya H provides the commentary of the Jinn in the homeland as a commentary on native social invisibility.

When Lamya H turns 17, she wins a scholarship to attend university in the US, where she realizes that she is being noticed more and more often. On campus, she observes people like her –black and brown students and students of the Muslim community and especially those who belonged to both – are frequently asked for their ID's. Even NYPD officers seem to act selectively toward her, and people like her. In this "Western" country, unlike the Arab country, Lamya H observes that she is hyper-visible; her racialized and religious minority status gives her this quality. Through this observation, and the critical theory of invisibility, she becomes interested in the works of authors such as "Audre Lorde and bell hooks and Angela Davis … Frantz Fanon [and] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o," she attends "lectures on postcolonial history" and learns more about Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and "the legacies of slavery and settler colonialism in the United States" (57–8). From these works and through her lived experiences she develops a theory of the jinn: the similarity in the unjustified fear and stigma attached to both jinn and certain racial identities. This realization helps her to

overcome her internalized self-hatred and leads to a deeper appreciation of the complexities surrounding identity and difference.

Reflecting on Sura Al-Jinn during a subway ride in New York city leads her to this personal revelation. This moment is pivotal as she understands that in *The Quran,* the Jinn describe themselves as exhibiting varied levels of righteousness and faith, just like humans.[58] The verses in this sura underscore the Jinn's diverse nature. Lamya H connects this revelation with her experiences as a brown-skinned, hijabi Muslim. She sees parallels between the stereotyping of Jinn and the racial prejudices she faces. This leads her to a profound realization: differences, whether in Jinn or humans, should not be grounds for fear or discrimination. She learns to reject the unfounded fear and stigma towards jinn, which mirrors her journey towards self-acceptance and helps her challenge social prejudices about her own identity.

B) What is Allah's Gender?

There are no such surahs titled, "Allah." That, however, is not Lamya H's concern here. In this chapter, a seven-year-old Lamya H asks the question: "Is Allah a man" (64)? When she receives her answer in the negative by her elders, she is also told that neither is Allah a woman. At ten, she asks her uncle why in some translations, God's pronouns are male, if Allah is neither? Her uncle responds that the translation is of the neutral Arabic *huwa*, the gender-

[58] The verses Lamya refers to which, offers a description of the Jinn from the Jinns' own tongue are:
"'Some of us are righteous and others less so: we follow different paths . . .
And when we heard the [Quran], we came to believe in it: whoever believes in his
Lord need fear no loss nor injustice.
Some of us submit to [God] and others go the wrong way: those who submit to God
have found wise guidance . . .' (72:1–21)"

less third person singular; in English, it is rendered as a 'he' as it is common and due to the similarity this practice would share with *The Bible*. Growing older, she comes across Islamic feminists who translate the huwa as female, "using *she* for God" (68). Lamya H disagrees with this practice also and offers her own translation. She asserts that other English pronouns for God could be "It. They. Ze … Allah uses the royal *we* in *The Quran* all the time! Why can't we use the royal *they*?" she asks (70). The questions around the rigidity and colonial duality of gender pervades this chapter of her life and its memoir.

One main issue that Lamya H explores in this chapter is "gender expansive concepts" and what they mean for her own sense of self. She asks if Allah can be genderqueer, nonbinary, and trans, and ultimately, asks the same question with regards to her own gender. She first recounts the several instances in her life where gender performances were assumed rigid, and how that made her feel. As a child, against her will, she was forced to wear makeup; at the airport, she is mistaken for a man; her young cousin confesses that as a child, she had thought Lamya H was a boy; even a friend asks if Lamya H had given thought to transitioning, because he thinks, she would "make a beautiful trans man" (81). She becomes furious at the suggestion that being trans is often equated solely with transitioning to a binary gender. She implies that if she is to be Godly, and if as established God has no gender, then there should be space for her to exist between and beyond these binaries.

Ultimately, she deduces that these gender issues are as much linguistic and representational as they are about power dynamics, as "language is power and naming things is power" (82). The chapter and this first part of her memoir concludes in a prayer:

> "And gender is nowhere within these concepts that define the Divine. God is neither man nor woman nor masculine nor feminine, nor not masculine, nor not feminine. This God, who teaches us that we can be both and neither and all and beyond and capable of multiplicities and

> expansiveness. Nonbinary, genderqueer, They, this God that is the God, my God, my Allah. Who created the world and created language and created the first person, Adam, this first person who was man and woman and neither and both and not a mistake, never a mistake. Like me" (83).

It is evident that Lamya H uses this prayer as a tool to articulate a vision of God that is inclusive and expansive. By denying God a fixed gender, she challenges the conventional portrayal of divinity as inherently male or female. This portrayal is an assertion against the gender binary that often confines religious and spiritual discussions, especially in Islamic discourse. Lamya's God is non-binary, genderqueer, embodying the fluidity and boundlessness of divine nature. Her use of various pronouns like "They" and "Ze" in reference to Allah suggests a resistance to gender normativity and a reclamation of language that is more encompassing and reflective of diverse identities.

Yet, this is also a personal identity for Lamya H. The prayer positions God as an embodiment of multiplicities and expansiveness, mirroring the vastness of human experiences and identities. Lamya H aligns her understanding of God with her personal experiences and the realities of those who exist beyond the gender binary. This alignment is not just theological but also personal – even collective – as it resonates with her own journey of self-acceptance as a queer Muslim, but also invites others to re-evaluate theirs too.

Importantly, this idea of queer aligns with queer theory's anti-normative imperative that nonbinary gender-based readings are the first step to a non-normative approach. However, gender cannot be defined by gender-only approaches. Gender is as much a sexual, racial, and class-based issue as it is defined by gender. It is on this basis that Lisa Duggan criticizes early practices in queer theory, which concerned themselves only with white same-sex issues – namely, their homonormativity. Lamya H's approach to gender is similarly based on

assemblage theory, in the same way that Jasbir Puar describes queerness,[59] as "not an identity nor an anti-identity, but an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent" on such abstractions as racial, gender-based, sex-based, and national attachments (*Terrorist Assemblages* 204). However, Lamya H's approach also challenges this idea of queerness, by focusing on the religious/spiritual dimension of this assemblage, which is often thought as normativizing (e.g. scriptural readings of queerness). Lamya H's navigation of queer issues is based on *The Quran* as she interprets it through her own personal bodily assemblage, which contains among other things, her queerness. The idiosyncrasy of Lamya H's queerness prevents her from falling prey to the risks associated with such normative acts as reading queerness through Scripture (scripturalism), because simultaneously she is defining *The Quran* personally, through her own idiosyncratically Muslim queer body.[60] For example, for Lamya H, Allah is genderqueer, because she herself is genderqueer, and the reverse holds equally true: Lamya H is genderqueer, because we can interpret God as genderqueer from the text of *The Quran*. This approach challenges queer theory's definitions of and insistence on secularity, at the same time as it contests the contours of normative reading.

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[59] Puar extracts this idea of assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari:

> "On a first, horizontal, axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away" (quoted 193).

[60] In the following sections, I will demonstrate how she diverges from individualism – namely, by clinging onto a text that is used collectively, employing her personal reading to convey the idea that *The Quran* needs to be read naturally, through one's body, one's identity, and one's truths.

The aforementioned mentioned three chapters conclude the first part of Lamya H's memoir, which deals with a queer re-reading of *The Quran* from the perspective of identity: mainly sex, gender, class, and race. In this first part, Lamya H demonstrated how she owns her identity as occupying several intersections and as it is subject to systemic intersectional discrimination. From this chapter on, Lamya H moves away from individualistic approaches to adopt a more communal tone to address the social and political forces that shape personal identity, and how to mobilize one's identity(ies) to generate a theory of coming out and creating queer kinships.

Second Part: Coming Out of the Closet Islamically

Shahada (Muslim Witnessness) as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation finds specific relevance from this part of Lamya H's memoir onward. Shahada occupies a conceptual space that straddles the spectrum between the act of self-sacrifice and hermeticism. The former verges on violence, and the latter's spiritual performance – isolating yourself from the people – will invite only silence, such silence that would render one only as *die Muselmanner* – in Agamben's words, a being who is utterly "mute and absolutely alone" (Homo Sacer 151), or elsewhere "the complete witness" (Remnants of Auschwitz 33). This silent spiritual act never endures, simply for the fact that it cannot be recounted. It is relevant to mention that Agamben also broaches this issue: those witnesses who live to tell the tale attempt to remain true to the pain endured in their stories, yet they always fail because those who *are* the representation of the pain will always remain silent, enacting the pain only through silence. Neither can express the pain truly.[61] Its flipside – surrounding yourself with

[61] "I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses .... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good

like-minded people – in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, will result only in buzzing, such as the sound a swarm of bees produce in the hive.[62] Both forms of shahada – utter silence and mere repetition – constitute passivity. Muslim shahada, with the double entendre on shaheed (self-sacrifice) and shahed (witness), as discussed in the first chapter, is a concept that I borrow from Shariati's tripartite mode of relationality (spirituality, justice, freedom) central to active citizenry. Manuchehri translates this spirituality as a form of *civil* spirituality, which recognizes that the greatest responsibility one has is to the members of the society. Shahada, as such, is a spiritual active citizenry that refuses to belong to the extremes of spirituality – self-sacrifice and hermeticism.

In memoir-writing, one can see this form of spirituality enacted in literary form. Muslim memoirists, such as Lamya H, enact shahada. They bear witness to the violence in order to perform their greatest responsibility which is to their fellow community members. Recounting such pain verges on the sacrificial, because discriminations will only intensify

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luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception .... We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse 'on behalf of third parties,' the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally" (Remnants of Auschwitz 32–3).

[62] Coleridge refers to circum fana, Latin for 'around the temple,' to describe the kind of false wisdom derived from false worship in a temple: "Having a deficient portion of internal and proper warmth, minds of this class seek in the crowd circum fana for a warmth in common, which they do not possess singly. Cold and phlegmatic in their own nature, like damp hay, they heat and inflame by co-acervation; or like bees they become restless and irritable through the increased temperature of collected multitudes. Hence the German word for fanaticism (such at least was its original import) is derived from the swarming of bees" (Biographia Literaria 21). One can find similarities between this understanding and Francis Bacon's *Idol of the Marketplace* (Novum Organum XLIII).

after the memoir is published and available to the public – one of the reasons why Lamya H writes under a pseudonym – and against all odds, refuses to remain silent, and become complete witnesses.

In the second part, we see how Lamya H describes the processes of shahada. She demonstrates a form of shahada that she performs in the course of three chapters of her life, and chronicles them under the titles of "Moses," "Mohammad," and "Asiyah," all Quranic figures. In each chapter, by identifying with the figure in question, Lamya H expounds on one facet of the 'Islamic closet,' – about what constitutes silence. On its flipside, she also illustrates the dangers of regurgitation: the dangers of following the herd, so to speak. Further, she also demonstrates how the tales of the Quranic figures inspired her to come out of the closet Islamically – that is, they helped her perform her own form of shahada.

A) Go Down, Lamya!

There is no single sura in *The Quran* dedicated solely to Musa (Moses), but he is a prophet whose name appears quite frequently in *The Quran*. The Quranic figure is almost identical to the one who appears in Judaic scriptures, one minor divergence being that after he discovers Israelites are worshipping a golden calf, he does not break the tablets, but rather places them down.[63] In Islamic hagiography, Moses is also thought to be the only prophet who had direct communication with God – unlike others, including Muhammad, who are said to receive revelations through angels. This is the reason why in Islamic texts, Moses is also referred to as Kalimullah (the one who spoke directly to God). This is shown in Sura Al-A'raf (The Heights): "And when Moses came at the time and place appointed by Us and his Lord spoke

[63] See Esposito, John L. (ed.). "Moses." *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

to him" (*Quran* 7:143). The message revealed to Moses was to reveal to Pharaoh that he is a prophet and there to save his oppressed people from Pharaoh's enslavement.

For Lamya H, being chosen by God to serve as a prophet is akin to the experience of coming out, because (a) it involves a moment of profound self-revelation and acceptance, (b) mirrors the internal conflict and courage seen in prophets like Moses, (c) draws strength from spiritual guidance in challenging personal circumstances, (d) represents an act of defiance against societal norms and expectations, and (e) embodies a form of liberation that extends beyond the individual to a broader community.

Lamya H's coming out happened unintentionally. It transpired while talking to Cara, a friend she found on a teaching trip. While trying to reveal to Cara that she had fallen in love with someone, Cara asks if that person was a girl. Lamya H does not respond; her silence and body language reveal to the friend, but also to her own surprise, this silence is the first time she is acknowledging that she is queer. The challenges Moses faces and his acceptance of his prophetic role resonate with Lamya H's struggle in embracing her queer identity. She draws a direct parallel to Moses' experience when he is overwhelmed by the enormity of his task yet accepts it. Lamya H writes, "Musa trembles. Caught on the brink, he pauses" (95). This is reflective of her own hesitation and eventual acceptance of her queer identity, as she describes, "I'm scared. All I have to say is one word: yes... I tremble. I pause" (97). She makes the analogy to highlight the internal conflict and the courage required to embrace an identity or calling that sets one apart.

Lamya H also finds strength in a prayer attributed to Moses, indicating the role of divine support in moments of personal revelation. She quotes: "My Lord. Expand for me my breast with confidence. And ease for me my task. And untie the knot from my tongue" (96). This

prayer becomes a source of strength for her as she faces the challenges of coming out, showing how spiritual guidance is sought in both prophetic missions and personal journeys of self-acceptance.

Moreover, Lamya H's coming out is depicted as an act against all odds, much like a prophet's mission. Prophets often face seemingly insurmountable challenges, and similarly, Lamya H confronts societal norms and expectations. Her journey is not just about self-acceptance but also about challenging and changing the narratives around her, a task laden with obstacles but pursued with resilience.

Finally, there's a sense of coming out to save the people, a theme central to prophetic narratives. Prophets like Moses are chosen to lead and liberate their people, and Lamya H sees her coming out in a similar light. By embracing her identity, she not only liberates herself but also contributes to a broader movement for acceptance and understanding. Her personal revelation and acceptance become acts of resistance and empowerment, echoing the prophetic tradition of leading and uplifting others through personal sacrifice and courage.

Importantly, she makes a point to problematize "the closet" as it is widely understood. Diverging from some prevalent norms associated with being gay in the West, she carves out her own path to queerness. Her decision to not come out to her parents is a significant departure from the often-emphasized narrative in LGBTQIA+ circles. She articulates this choice by stating, "I'm not planning to come out to my parents, not now and possibly not ever. It doesn't make sense," highlighting the personal and cultural complexities involved in her decision (100).[64] Furthermore, Lamya H's detachment from the typical gay nightlife and party

[64] Lamya H's choice not to come out to her family aligns with the idea of maintaining *aberoo* (Persian phrase meaning maintaining face for family and community). In an ethnographical essay by Shadee

scene is reflected in one account: “It’s not really my scene . . .” and elaborated upon when she recalls a visit to a bar, “I had felt so out of place in this bar filled with smoke and too-loud music, with palpable sexual tension and sly checkouts and an endlessly sticky floor” (101). These reflections demonstrate how she strives to disconnect from certain social expectations and activities often linked with gay culture in the West, emphasizing not only her individualized approach to navigating queer identity, but one that is also *Quran*-inspired and for the good of other Muslims who might feel the same.

B) “Lamya, Iqra’ (Read)!”

Lamya H’s eponymously titled fifth chapter is dedicated to Muhammad, the main prophet of Islam. The 47th chapter of *The Quran* also bears his name, and it is said to be revealed and recited to his followers at a time of physical and ideological strife as a source of fortitude, urging believers to remain steadfast and persevere through adversities. Therefore, it primarily focuses on the theme of resistance in struggle, addressing the challenges faced by the early Muslim community in their conflicts with the Quraysh, the dominant tribe in Mecca that strongly opposed Prophet Muhammad's teachings. One verse that encapsulates this spirit of encouragement is found in Surah 7: “So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are [true] believers” (Quran 47:7). Inspired from this, Lamya H parallels her

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Abdee, she demonstrates how aberoo functions for non-Western LGBTQIA+ people in the so-called “closet:” her study highlights the limitations of “the closet” metaphor, often used in Western narratives about LGBTQIA+ experiences. The metaphor's inadequacies and oversimplifications do not honor the unique experiences in non-Western contexts like those of Iranian Americans. Instead, understanding aberoo as a form of queer relationality provides a deeper insight into queer identity formations that diverge from white normativities. Aberoo acts as a form of enacting queer familial relationality, crucial for understanding the identities of many queer people of color, particularly in non-Western contexts (Abdee, 71-87).

own troubles with faith – in her case, remaining true to her identity in the face of intersectional violence – with Muhammad's. She finds solace in the belief that Muhammad suffered similar pains but emerged victorious. This chapter, much like the previous, views a prophet's life, as recounted in *The Quran*, as a source of inspiration to come out, in spite of the hardship to do so.

Revisiting the notion that *HBB* perceives *The Quran* as Muhammad's personal memoir, in this chapter, Muhammad's journey of divine revelation is seen as a paradigm for self-revelation. Here, revelation parallels the personal awakening to one's own truths. This epiphany underscores the necessity of self-disclosure. Lamya H proposes a step-by-step approach to coming out, inspired by Muhammad's method of revealing divine truths: Firstly, accept yourself as you are. Secondly, confide in your close friends and inner circle. Thirdly, extend this truth to those beyond your immediate group. Writing a memoir is seen as representative of the ultimate act in this journey.

When Muhammad receives his first divine revelation, he is described as being "forty years old" when he receives "a revelation from God in the form of a command. Read" (118). This moment signifies a turning point in his life, marking the beginning of his prophetic mission. Similarly, Lamya H equates her realization and acceptance of her queer identity to receiving a personal wahi. She states, "And I. I am twenty-one when I come out to myself as queer, when I receive something akin to a wahi of my own" (121). This parallel draws a connection between the internal awakening and acceptance experienced by both figures.

The second phase of the journey, confiding in close ones, is illustrated through the shared experiences of Muhammad and Lamya H. Muhammad, after his initial revelation, seeks solace in his wife, Khadijah. He shares his experience with her. Lamya H describes it as

"you feel calm enough to tell Khadijah what has transpired, about the angel, the voice, the commands, your terror" (120). Khadijah's supportive response plays a crucial role in Muhammad's journey. Lamya H mirrors this experience in her own life when she contemplates revealing her queer identity to Rashid and Salwa; they "are the first people from my mosque whom I've considered telling I'm queer" (120). She emphasizes the important role of queer kinships in coming out. The act of sharing such profound truths with trusted individuals is a vital step in both narratives.

In the narrative, the theme of wider disclosure is exemplified as both Muhammad and Lamya H take their personal truths beyond their immediate circles. Muhammad's gradual sharing of his revelations is described as, "You share the message in secret at first... Slowly, you invite others into this circle of trust. You build a small following, a small community" (127). This careful expansion of his message to a broader audience illustrates the thoughtful approach to revealing his divine mission. Similarly, Lamya H's journey towards wider disclosure is marked by her decision to openly share her identity with her friends, as she narrates, "But today is the day, I've decided... 'Guys. I wanted to tell you that I'm gay'" (125). Expanding the circle of disclosure reflects a significant milestone in her personal journey, akin to Muhammad's spreading of his message, as with *The Quran*, as with *Hijab Butch Blues*.

In sum, this chapter delineates the basic structure and aim of the memoir: a memoir that is Lamya H's *Quran*, just like *The Quran* is Muhammad's lived experiences. Lamya H confronts the silence that often shrouds personal and communal struggles, particularly within the context of faith and identity. In her entire memoir, there is tension between two extremes of bearing witness: silence and self-sacrifice, between remaining silent or coming out as openly gay and facing the consequences. In this chapter, while she articulates, "Being queer is

a private thing for me because I don't feel safe telling people," she equally cautions against the pitfalls of conformity (134). The "regurgitation" of societal norms without personal conviction, as reflected in her introspections whether in repeating performance of a "normal" Muslim or a "normal" gay person can be summarized in a question she asks: "What silence, what shame, does she want from me in exchange for her friendship, her acceptance?" (135). Silence for Lamya H is equal to shame, and she is unwilling to commit to any even at the sake of preserving friends who are not affirming of her entire identity. For Lamya H this narrative transcends mere storytelling; it becomes an act of spiritual witness, a form of bearing witnessness to the pitfalls of coming out *and* being spiritual: there are dangers involved in remaining either entirely silent or in completely sacrificing oneself. Her form of memoir is a practice in shahada that seeks to challenge and transform.

C) Asiyah, as Subaltern

Lamya H chooses Asiyah as a role model because she (Asiyah) is rarely mentioned in *The Quran*; even though, in traditional Islamic thought, she is often considered as one of the four great women of history: Asiyah (The wife to the Pharaoh of Exodus), Maryam (Mary), Khadija (Muhammad's first wife), and Fatemeh (Muhammad's daughter) (chronologically). Asiyah is mentioned only twice in *The Quran*, the most cited of which is in the form of a prayer in her own voice. She prays God to relieve her against the Egyptians, especially her husband, the Pharaoh. Very little else is known of Asiyah's life, Lamya H admits. This is troublesome, she thinks: The subaltern cannot speak, it is true. Yet, while utopia is unattainable, the direction towards which one strives is also important. Therefore, she extrapolates a life for Asiyah beyond scripture. The Asiyah of her imagination leaves Pharaoh when he is busy fighting with Moses, she "leaves Egypt altogether … to a land far away,

somewhere else, anywhere else" (174). She does not openly admit this in the text, but her analogy with Asiyah might reveal the fact that Lamya H's hometown might have felt similar to life under the rule of Pharaoh.

The reason for this impersonation might become clearer if we return to the idea of the subaltern, especially as it concerns women. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak addresses the issue of representation, noting, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, that the figure of the woman disappears (28). Lamya H's endeavor to bring Asiyah's story to the forefront can be seen as a revisionist feminist act, where she seeks to ethically highlight and reinvigorate the narrative of Asiyah. It also serves as the attempt to produce the infrastructures for women like Asiyah – caught in difficult situations, like bad marriages – to speak for themselves and as such emerge. For instance, Asiyah recounts the story of an anonymous old friend who had severed all friendships with Lamya H for two years. One day Lamya H receives a call from this friend years after the disconnect; she sounds happy but confesses to being beaten by her husband – an act the friend thinks *The Quran* gives husbands the right to perform. Lamya H becomes furious, calls her mom for consolation, and her mom reminds Lamya H of the story of Asiyah, who had a difficult life under the Pharaoh and whom Allah helped.

This story is paralleled with Lamya H's fragile existence as an immigrant in the US. She sometimes laments the fact that her entire existence can be dependent on the whims of an immigrant officer who might reject the renewal of Lamya H's temporary residence under false suspicions, a "missed expiration date, or a government policy change" (164). In the middle of waiting for the results of the immigration and spending a few months paperless, Lamya H decides that she has had enough and will return to her home country. Her "Queer Life Mentor"

dissuades her, saying she is being irrational, and arguing that life as a lesbian unmarried person in her hometown, the language of which she barely remembers, would be impossible; she would simply need to appeal because that is "just the way the system works" (167). Lamya H perseveres and is subsequently successful in staying in the US but she is furious that wherever she might have landed, her hometown or the US, she was always going to be discriminated against. This becomes a powerful motivation to cling onto her *Quran*-based mode of life, in which she asks the questions: "How can I fight injustices in this place where I have community, where I'm choosing to stay? How can I build a life here that feels rooted in my principles, even if it will never be perfect? Like Muhammad, I ask myself whom do I build with? Like Maryam, I ask myself how do I live?" (175).

In Islamic tradition, Asiyah's representation is emblematic of the broader issue of how women's voices and experiences are often marginalized in religious and historical narratives. The limited portrayal of her story in Islamic texts, overshadowed by more prominent male figures, is reflective of the patriarchal norms that have shaped these narratives. Lamya H's endeavor to reinvigorate Asiyah's narrative through her memoir is a response to this historical oversight, unintentional or not. By imaginatively extrapolating Asiyah's life beyond the scriptural accounts and paralleling it with her own experiences, Lamya H not only reclaims Asiyah's voice but also uses it as a lens to scrutinize and challenge her contemporary circumstances. This approach is not merely about revisiting a historical figure; it is a profound act of drawing parallels between the struggles of the past and the present, particularly for women in difficult situations, using source material from their endogenous culture that has been overlooked, ignored, and erased.

Third Part: Building Muslim Queer Kinships through the Quran

Queer relationality, as explored in the field of queer theory, underscores the unique ways in which queer identities shape and influence relationships beyond conventional (hetero)normative parameters. The theory of queer relationality developed in part through Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Her theory is premised on the grounds that gender identities are not inherent or static but are constantly being performed and renegotiated through social interaction and cultural norm – an anti-identitarian premise. This perspective laid the groundwork for a theory of queer relationality, where relationships are not fixed but are continuously evolving and being renegotiated. Sedgwick's exploration of queer relationality similarly refuses to engage directly with sexual orientation or identity; instead, it emphasizes the complexity and variety of relationships and affinities that might be considered 'queer'. She broadens the category of queer to mean "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 7). Therefore, she contributed to relationality in the way in which she widened the scope of queer. Sedgwick's students, on the other hand, explored different modes of relationality to give new meaning to "queerness." The nebulous contours of queer relationality were shaped by José Esteban Muñoz, especially in his edited volume *Cruising Utopia*, in the introduction of which he provides a paradigmatic example of queer relationality as found in a poem by Frank O'Hara, titled "Having a Coke with You;" Muñoz writes:

> The poem tells us of a quotidian act, having a Coke with somebody, that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality. The quotidian act of sharing a Coke, consuming a common commodity with a beloved with whom one shares secret smiles, trumps fantastic moments in the history of art. Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely the past and in its queer

> relationality promises a future. The fun of having a Coke is a mode of exhilaration in which one views a restructured sociality. The poem tells us that mere beauty is insufficient for the aesthete speaker, which echoes Bloch's own aesthetic theories concerning the utopian function of art. If art's limit were beauty— according to Bloch— it is simply not enough. 17 The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here. O'Hara first mentions being wowed by a high-art object before he describes being wowed by the lover with whom he shares a Coke. Here, through queer-aesthete art consumption and queer relationality the writer describes moments imbued with a feeling of forward-dawning futurity. ("Introduction" 5-6)

I quote the passage in full here to make an important point about the premises of queer relationality. As defined throughout his book, Muñoz views queer relationality with regards to queer futurity, which is a mode of relation to time that appears to be inclined towards the future in the sense that it is optimistic, following Ernst Bloch's usage of the word "futurity."[65] Muñoz turns to utopia to provide a commentary on queer relationality which is a "critique of the way in which paranoid reading practices have become so nearly automatic in queer studies that they have, in many ways, ceased to be critical" (12). Similarly, he argues that "antiutopianism in queer studies, which is more often than not intertwined with antirelationality, has led many scholars to an impasse wherein they cannot see futurity for the life of them" (12). Therefore, instead he redefines relationality as that which promises a queer futurity, in his analysis of O'Hara's poem Muñoz provides this critique: queer relationality can be "moments imbued with a feeling of forward-dawning futurity", of hope in and for a socially just future. He suggests queer relationality can be a relation to art that seems to anticipate a relation to (a) person(s), which feels timeless in the way it views chronological

[65] For Bloch, optimism involves a philosophical commitment to futurity, not the past. Therefore: "Hope is not taken only as emotion, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but more essentially as *a directing act of a cognitive kind* (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory)" (12).

time, and which also appears hopeful in the way it views politics. In other words, his utopian readings are aligned with what Sedgwick calls "reparative hermeneutics" (12). Reparative reading, as Sedgwick describes it, involves adopting a stance that encompasses various emotions, goals, and dangers. This approach can teach us how individuals and groups manage to derive support and nourishment from a culture's elements, even in a culture that has frequently expressed an intention not to provide such support. (Sedwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* 150). Muñoz's concept of "queerness as futurity" suggests a forward-thinking approach to relationships, where he posits, "we must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there" (13). Together these notions align with queer relationality's current focus on envisioning relationships that defy current societal norms and point towards more inclusive and liberated forms of connection in the future.

This is one way one can read queer Muslim memoirs: through a Muslim queer relationality that is bent towards the future in its aspirations and desires. Utopian Muslim queer relationality, as Lamya H admits, is unattainable if the utopian element is highlighted. Critique, however, provides the means to imagine it in a way that the relational is thought to aspire to the utopian, not the utopian to be understood as relational. As Lamya mentions, we ought not to be "faithless enough to think that the direction in which I strive doesn't matter, that these smaller versions of the world aren't leading us there" (34). That is, reparative hermeneutics provides the means to understand queer relationality as opposed to antirelational modes of critique, exemplified in the works of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, especially in

their *Homos* and *No Futures*, respectively.[66] Yet, another way one can understand Muslim queer relationality is not to define it through its opposition to antirelationality, as Muñoz attempts, but as we did in the previous chapter, we can complement practices of 'reparative hermeneutics' with *queer subjectless critique*.

Subjectless critique in the sense studied by queer theory is a critique that understands queer "as a political metaphor without a fixed referent," meaning that queer should encompass subjects beyond a queer subject that is solely sexual or gender-based. One contribution that the theory of intersectionality has brought is to demonstrate that analysis which is predicated on gender-only, race-only, class-only, etc. premises will yield results that are at best innocuously naïve, or at worse, stubbornly misleading. Kimberlé Crenshaw initially used this approach to show the misjustices conducted on black women in the US legal system – they are neither considered black enough to deserve legal treatment, nor are they considered woman enough. One misstep that intersectionality has arguably made is that its view of identity politics is two-dimensional, often illustrated in the form of Venn Diagrams. A subjectless critique that is aware of these promises and pitfalls considers the subject as one whose identity is unfixed, never really equal portions of any. While Crenshaw points out that her idea has never been solely about identity but about the compounded violence that being situated on several intersections of identity might portend, intersectionality in this sense still (a) frames

[66] Muñoz describes his reasons: "I nonetheless contend that most of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of "antirelational thesis" moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference" (11).

identity through violence and (b) through violence, categorizes the subject into sections and intersections. As mentioned earlier, Jasbir Puar popularized the term identity assemblage, instead of intersectional/intersectionality, to demonstrate that like a mesh of nebulae, identities are never completely ever detached from one another. Her criticism is that intersectional theories do not view the human entirely. In the poststructural sense, she claims that a subject, the entirety of a subject, resists definition; to say the least, it is more than its constituent parts. A subject overflows the sum of its structures that it is meant to constitute. Therefore, intersectionality has slippages it does not acknowledge; namely, we can see that there is always already non-belonging sections of a subject that refuse to be intersected: there is always something of the subject that intersectionality will exclude, an element that even all the Venn diagrams, together, can never encompass. In the view of assemblage theory, there are always some identity elements that slip categorization. This is the reason why the framework of the critique championed by Puar is called subjectless.

A Muslim queer relationality that is subjectless ought to take heed of these considerations. Muslim queer relationality is subjectless in the sense that it views the Muslim queer intersectionally, which is to say: opposed to "the antirelational mode of being that pulls queer away from the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (Muñoz 11). Muslim queer relationality views critique as inseparable from its practices of reparative hermeneutics, because that is what gives it political force.

Muslim queer relationality also understands that Muslim queer is not the sum of Muslimhood and queerness, but a concept that supersedes the two at the same time that it evades categorization. Therefore, it is important to note that the term "queer Muslim memoir"

is a placeholder, an umbrella term used to describe the revolutionary force that such memoirs exhibit as they attempt to redefine Muslimhood through queerness and queerness through Muslimhood. Moreover, Muslim queer relationality acknowledges that there is slippage worth examining in this critique: for instance, how can queering the canon of a religion represent an anti-identitarian and anti-normative act if the holy text itself is normativizing to an extent far exceeding the influence a memoir can yield?

We partially answered this question in the first part of this chapter. In the third chapter of *HBB*, we see Lamya H envisioning the indistinct contours of Muslim queer relationality as she literally builds queer kinship spaces in the US and literarily portrays them in her memoir. Lamya H's theory highlights the performative aspect of Muslim queer relationality, a sometimes ritualistic aspect that is affected by religious discourse. First, it emphasizes on a redefinition of religion, one that is the inspiration for anti-normative attitudes, especially using Abrahamic religions' originary moment as evidence: The idea that originally, Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, was a religion for the oppressed.[67] She suggests that through her lived bodily experience of oppression, we can appreciate the fact that Islam was originally a religion of the oppressed with the revolutionary power bestowed upon it due its anti-normative stance to society at the time of its origination, a religion that revolutionized class roles early in its development, as evidenced in the Quran. I believe that this mode of performing Muslimhood can add to the idea of relationality as discussed in queer theory. In the way that she performs shahada, or Muslim Witnessness, in her memoir *Hijab Butch Blues,* Lamya's

[67] A view supported by Engels's revolutionary theory, suggests that Christianity was originally a "movement of oppressed people." It is worth noting that Engels reserved religious revolutionary potential only to Christianity. In fact, he provides Islam as a paradigmatic counter-example to Christianity, of a religion that has no revolutionary potential. (Engels n.p.)

performance of relationality is non-normative in its imperative, anti-antirelational in its approach, subjectless in its method, and utopian in its promise, importantly, in a way that is inspired by religion. This is what I define as Muslim queer relationality.

The third and final part of HBB especially highlights those aspects. This part is the story of life in diaspora. In four chapters, Lamya describes herself searching for utopia in diaspora, trying to form Muslim queer relations of the future. She imagines herself like Nuh (Noah) forsaking a people unwilling to accept her and building arks in her search for affirming spaces; like Yusuf (Joseph), she finds herself abandoned, forced to forge new bonds, to select her queer kinship circles selectively; Like Hajar (Abraham's wife), she finds herself exiled, as in a desert; like Yunus (Jonah), she finds herself willing to live in a whale rather than live with people averse to accepting her.

A) Lamya's Ark

The Noah Lamya creates in this chapter is a Quranic figure who was sent by God to invite people to be kind, to redistribute their wealth to the poor, to invite them to a religion "rooted in love—of God, of people, of good" (195). Most people, however, refute him, refusing to change. Some do follow him, and these are people who are generally among "the weak and oppressed and the most marginalized in the land" (189). But Noah persists in preaching the religion for 950 years, until God tells him to build an ark. There is a flood. And, as Lamya imagines it, Noah and his followers escape it, building another community thereafter that is "based, on their principles, a community rooted in hope" (210).[68]

[68] In Islamic Scripture, نوح(Nuh or Noah) is one of the Ulu al-Azm prophets, prophets who persevered in preaching the message of Islam – surrender to Allah. Other such prophets commonly include Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The story of Noah is a narrative of steadfast faith, divine

In this chapter, Lamya's encounters at the Islamic center illustrate the initial stages of building Muslim queer relations. Her connection with another woman is not just a personal journey but is representative of the broader struggle for acceptance which begins within the subject before taking form inside the queer Muslim community. She reflects,

> "And suddenly somewhere in the past month, I developed feelings for her, inconvenient feelings that won't go away. Feelings that I'm beginning to understand the contours of, since coming out to Cara two years ago, but feelings that I don't know quite what to do with. What I do know is this: even when we're not hanging out, we end up exchanging so many one-line emails about our days that my in-box runs out of storage. This girl teases me about my dessert obsession. I tease her for going to a bougie gym. The banter is torturously exquisite. These feelings that I have? I have them bad" (181).

The journey to building queer relations with others begins with the inconvenience of taking non-normative stances (feelings, among others) to sexual expression. Why are these feelings inconvenient, Lamya seems to ask. Personal acceptance, as mentioned when discussing the chapter titled "Muhammad," happens through a revelation for Lamya. It begins with a realization that prompts questions such as the above: "Why do I *feel* inconvenient?" The answer might not be entirely contingent on others; in other words, other people might not be the only things that deserve blame in making Lamya feel inconvenienced. Her inconvenience begins before the moment of 'face-to-faceness,' as Lauren Berlant describes the effect of others when they are absent. Inconvenience for Berlant is "the force that makes one shift a little while processing the world … the mere idea of situations or other people can also jolt into awareness the feel of their inconvenience, creating effects that don't stem from events but from internally generated affective prompts" (2). In other words, "Hell is other people," it is

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guidance, and the consequences of disbelief, highlighting the importance of monotheism and righteousness in Islamic teachings.

true, but other people are not constructed without one's own innate prejudices (Sartre 20); those prejudices engender the inconvenience even before being face to face with others. Lamya's inconvenience begins when she falls in love with a straight girl, knowing for certain that she would not change. Inconvenienced by her own feelings, Lamya recounts how Noah surely was similarly inconvenienced that most of the people he preached to did not beckon his call to justice, did not change. Noah, too, must have doubted himself then, thinks Lamya. His inconvenience was circumnavigated by accepting that most will not heed his call. Instead, as Lamya narrates, he builds a ship to another community elsewhere. Similarly, Lamya comes to the difficult realization that her feeling is indeed inconvenient since it is non-normative. The realization that the feeling is non-normative, as such, results in questioning normativity: Why are my feelings attracted to normativity? Why is the convenient normative? The balance of convenience and normativity, of comfort and safeness, realizes Lamya, ought to be challenged before one starts to build queer relations. Therefore, as if she was ordained by God to trouble this balance, she acts on this revelation.

She acts on the revelation by coming out gay incrementally, the theory of which we discussed in the last section. In practice, she tackles her fear of dating queer people – a fear she thinks is caused by two major issues: dating queer people would make "gayness real in ways it isn't when [she's] crushing on straight girls" (195); and getting rejected by straight girls was easier to tolerate as "it is preordained: so familiar that it makes the uncomfortable comfortable, normal, expected—even safe" (197). At the advice of her queer life mentor, she installs Grindr on her phone, and after trying to date queer people and wanting to fail in dating them, she finds the right person, and as Noah received the flood who took him to a new world, so does she feel like she had been sent a flood to wash her "cynicism and hopelessness" away.

The lesson Lamya derives from the Story of the Flood and its subsequent quest for utopia is that she must first accept her non-normative stances then muddy the waters of convenience, normativity, comfort, and safety first for herself, and only then for others.

B) The Queer Indispensability of Joseph and Lamya

One of Muñoz's main concerns in *Cruising Utopia* was the critique of the antirelational approach to queer theory, an approach he characterizes as keen to replace "the romance of community with the romance of the singularity and negativity" (10). He acknowledges the gains of this approach, namely its emphasis on "dismantling the anticritical understanding of queer community", yet he also associates it with its stubborn disdain for critical utopianism or political idealism on the charges that such utopian thinking is naïve, impractical, and lacks rigor. In *Cruising Utopia*, he argued for replacing a faltering antirelational mode of queer theory with "a queer utopianism that highlights a renewed investment in social theory (one that calls on not only relationality but also futurity)" (10). From Fredric Jameson's "anti-antiutopianism" Muñoz extracts a theory of anti-antirelationality that is not necessarily "positive investment in utopia" (14). Rather, defined by its opposition to the "short sighted denial of anything but the here and now of this moment" (14), it is a critique of the normativity of the established present time – a critique of the status quo. The endeavour is, nevertheless, a negative act – yet, a negative act that resists negativity. It tries to break free of the tyranny of the status quo, or as Muñoz puts it, "the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality" to imagine a queer utopianism that attaches itself to theories of temporality derived from Herbert Marcuse[69] (who developed his understanding of temporality through his once-

[69] In *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse emphasizes the role of dialectical thought in challenging the established norms and perceptions of reality. He states, "Dialectical thought thus becomes negative

mentor's magnum opus, Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and Ernst Bloch, as deliberated upon in *The Principle of Hope*[70].

I argue that such mode of thinking is conducive to the study of works that are spiritual in the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. Works such as queer Muslim memoirs will benefit from such study, as these works are fundamentally utopian works – they yearn and emit divine hope; they are anti-anti-relational, always directed towards futurity. Lamya's utopian thinking begins within herself, but also stretches to the bonds she forms. In the eighth chapter of her

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in itself," aiming to "break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense" and to expose the fallacies in the "language of facts." Marcuse highlights that this form of thinking reveals the "unfreedom" at the core of reality, leading to an inevitable "explosion and catastrophe" of the existing state. Marcuse aligns the goals of dialectical analysis with historical analysis, emphasizing that "nature itself appears as part and stage in its own history and in the history of man." This progression of cognition from common sense to deeper knowledge uncovers a world "negative in its very structure," as "that which is real opposes and denies the potentialities inherent in itself." Furthermore, Marcuse draws a connection between dialectical thought and avant-garde literature, namely Mallarmé for whom a flower absent from all bouquets is a presence that has not yet presented itself – belongs to the future. In this sense, dialectical thought and symbolist avant-garde literature both seek an "authentic language." This language of negation is a "Great Refusal to accept the rules of a game in which the dice are loaded." He concludes by stating, "The absent must be made present because the greater part of the truth is in that which is absent," emphasizing the importance of recognizing and articulating the unrepresented or overlooked aspects of reality (151–52).

[70] Bloch's work is fundamentally a study of hopes, dreams, and aspirations that he argues are an integral to human consciousness and social reality. He examines a wide range of cultural, artistic, and intellectual manifestations of hope, from fairy tales and daydreams to the great works of literature and philosoph to delineate a utopianism can be used as a critical tool for analyzing texts. His ideas encourage readers to consider the latent utopian potentials within literature, the hidden promises of a better world that lie beneath the surface of narrative and character. Bloch's emphasis on the "Not-Yet-Conscious," a state of mind and being that contains the potential for future becoming, aligns with Muñoz's anti-antirelational mode of queer theory, which engages in reparative hermeneutics, not blind intellectual cynicism.

memoir, titled "Yusuf," after its eponymous Quranic sura, Lamya interprets her bodily lived experiences through the Quranic figure of Joseph. Lamya's Joseph is congruous with the Quranic figure, whose name titles the 12th sura of the Quran: son to Jacob, a father, himself a prophet, who loved Joseph best among all his children; the second to last youngest brother to seven others who treacherously separated him from Jacob, and who many years later returned to Canaan to his father as the Overseer of the Granaries of Egypt. Lamya uses the context and content of the sura to provide a commentary on queer Muslim relationality in ways that can be interpreted as anti-anti-relational in its premise and utopian in its promises.

In this chapter, Lamya directs her attention to the interpretation of Surah Yusuf as the archetype of the diasporic figure who lives in exile, as a nomad who is forced to change dwellings, as a person who is indispensable to the people of his community, whether in Canaan or Egypt. She presents queer indispensability as a theory derived from the Joseph of Scripture, to signify a mode of living "in which queer people tend to make themselves indispensable in their relationships and friendships. They're so afraid of being left alone that they make themselves unleavable" (229). This theory of queer indispensability aligns with Muñoz's concept of anti-antirelationality in the way that the subject refuses to define themselves non-relationally, in a void, yet who in the face of the inconvenience of other people still persist in building relations. This queer indispensability is not altogether innocuous. It is one, Lamya describes, that forces oneself to hide from one's own vulnerabilities, because when manifest, vulnerability might repel others:

> I'm convinced vulnerability is a repellent in myself but not in others. I cried in that dark theater for myself, for decades of friendship where people were closer to me than I was to them, for this person I've become who wants more out of relationships, who wants intimacy and interdependence, who can only give but can't receive. Who is too scared to risk anything and everything, for fear of being left (231).

For Lamya this resonates with Yusuf's need to be indispensable in Egypt: His abandonment issues in childhood motivated him to become indispensable to the Pharaoh. For Lamya, what keeps her struggling to form relationships is her quest to build an intentional community that is affirming of her identity entirely. In this sense she refuses to sever all relationships, refuses to creep back into her loneliness, and instead perseveres and defines herself anti-antirelationally. Her intentional relations, her Quran-reading group and her lover, encourage her to do so.

This makes her yearn for an utopian futurity where she can let herself be vulnerable and imperfect and even dispensable. To return to Marcuse, utopianism is creating the what-is-not out of the what-is; for Lamya it is creating an imaginary place where people would "love each other and ourselves regardless" of disappointments inherent in any forming community. (239). Thus, Lamya envisions a utopian future, a realm where relational complexities are embraced rather than shunned, where interdependence is celebrated, and where her own fears and vulnerabilities are acknowledged as part of the communal fabric. In this envisioned space, inspired by the Quran, we can use Muñoz's conception of utopia, to relationships are not just about being needed but also about the freedom to be vulnerable, to be one's authentic self, imperfect yet integral to the collective whole.

C) Hajar's Sacrifice as Lamya's

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida proclaims: "The ethical point of view must remain valid: Abraham is a murderer." The reason he is a murderer is that the intention behind one's action, the attempt to commit such social ill as murder, already deserves punishment in modern society even if not executed successfully. However, in the mythological event, Abraham's intention is one that resists normative judgement as it is at the command of God.

Le tout-autre, or as Nassar translates Derrida, "the wholly other,"[71] in either case, equates Abraham's attempt to murder with murder itself. In his intention, in that fraction of a second before he was told to stop, he committed murder, the ultimate sacrifice – sacrifice without calculation, in negation of the "general economy of sacrifice," therefore, deserves the ultimate reward: the rejection of sacrifice (94). By attempting to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is sacrificing himself, and as such has already rejected any proportionate earthly reward.[72]

Terry Eagleton reads this as not entirely altruistic, or only altruistic insofar as it considers oneself as *tout autre*. Abraham's sacrifice was for the sake of others as Jesus's sacrifice was for the sake of others, as much as it was for their own sakes, Eagleton argues. This resonates with the idea of the martyr, who Eagleton describes as "seeking to live his death in the here and now, seeing it as incarnate in the perishable stuff of the body rather than simply as a future event … the martyr rejects the world out of love for it, which is where he or she differs from the suicide" (87). The martyr's love for the *tout-autre* (as *soi-même*) compels the martyr to bear witness to the love, by an act of radical sacrifice[73].

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[71] *Tout autre est tout autre,* is a proverb Nassar translates succinctly as "every other (one) is every (bit) other" (82). Derrida's use of Levinas' "*le tout-autre*," as the wholly/holy other, is one that is beyond human understanding, possibly transcendent.

[72] In Derrida's words, "Abraham had consented to suffer death or worse, and that without calculating, without investing, beyond any perspective of recouping the loss; hence, it seems, beyond recompense or retribution, beyond economy, without any hope of remuneration" (95).

[73] In *Radical Sacrfice*, Eagleton suggests that true sacrifice entails giving up something of profound value for a greater good, often leading to transformation or the creation of something new and valuable. He sees sacrifice as a form of protest against the status quo, a way of subverting established power structures, and a means of achieving solidarity and collective identity. He therefore reframes the idea of sacrifice from a passive, often negative act to an active, transformative one with the potential to challenge and reshape social and political realities.

In the course of this dissertation, I have interpreted martyrdom inversely – not the radical sacrifice to die but the radical sacrifice of bearing witness. In this dissertation, I have been arguing that Muslim memoirs are acts of radical sacrifice, martyrdom – as the execution of the Muslim shahada, or bearing witness for the sake of others. In queer Muslim memoirs, such as *HBB*, I see it performed as a form of Muslim queer relationality that is utopian in its mission. This is the way in which Lamya's interpretation of the sacrifice of Ismail[74] differs from Derrida's or Eagleton's. It revolves around the calculation of sacrifice and the character of Hajar. Her reading differs in two important ways. First, she asks, "Where is Hajar in this? Does she know what they're plotting together, her son and his father? Does she get a say in this decision to kill her child, for whom she was exiled, who is all she has? Does Ibrahim share the dream with Hajar, too? Is she, too, of the ones who are patient? Or does she wail, cry, and rage at the fate of herself and her child?" (246). Then she asks: what is the need to regurgitate interpretations of Abraham's sacrifice as they have been throughout history? She warns against both violence and silence. She says,

> "In the story that I prefer, though, Allah says, No, stupid, I never asked you to do this. Just because you saw something in a dream doesn't mean that you have to do it, especially if it's something entirely unreasonable, entirely against the principles of love and justice and everything I've taught you so far. I was testing you, Ibrahim, says Allah. But the test was to see if you'd use the intellect that I gave you, and you haven't. You've followed blindly. You've failed" (247).

The narrative Lamya extracts from this story is about Hajar: the archetype of martyrdom in her eyes, who is both the shahed (witness) and the shaheed (martyr) concurrently. In Agamben's notion of the Musulmann, Hajar is the complete witness – one who did not live to

[74] In Islamic hagiographies, unlike Judaism, it is not Sara's son, Isaac, who is taken to the altar of sacrifice, but Hajar's, Ismail.

tell the tale. For Lamya, this needs to change. The force of anti-antirelationality compels Lamya to read Hajar's story through her absence, to retell Hajar's story in a way that is poetically just. In fact, Lamya chooses to relive Hajar's story in the way she imagines Hajar would have conducted herself. Hajar's is the story that ought to be retold, thinks Lamya, because Hajar has lost the most – her voice. Lamya's memoir in this sense is a practice in reparative hermeneutics. She says: The Hajar of the Quran is mute. It is only in hadiths and tafsir that we see her referenced, and even there, she is limited to her desperate attempts to find water in the deserts of Mecca, not for herself, but for her son, Ismail.[75] Lamya laments this: Hajar's truths are hidden as her own. Lamya's truths about her queerness are hidden from her own biological family. She laments Hajar's absence from the story just as she laments her own inability to come out queer to her biological family. She laments that Hajar never got a choice in the story of her abandonment and her only son's sacrifice, just as she laments not being able to introduce her girlfriend, Liv, to her family as she really is to her, not a casual friend, but a lifetime partner. She reflects on how "difficult or unfair or enraging" it must have been for Hajar to undergo all that as it is for herself to hide her queerness. Lamya asks God for a utopia, one eventually raised like Mecca around Hajar; she asks God to create all these from

[75] Hajar, an Egyptian handmaid and the second wife of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), bore him a son, Ismail (Ishmael). Following a divine command, Ibrahim left Hajar and Ismail in the barren valley of Mecca with minimal provisions. After their water was depleted, Hajar frantically searched for more, running seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah. Meanwhile, Ismail, parched and crying, pounded the ground with his feet in distress. Miraculously, a spring of water, later known as Zamzam, emerged at the spot where Ismail struck the ground. Hajar tried to contain the water, exclaiming "Zam Zam!" which means "Stop! Stop!" in Arabic. This well, continuously flowing to this day, attracted others, leading to the establishment of the settlement that would become Mecca. Ismail is considered the forefather of the Arab people and, together with Ibrahim, later built the Kaaba in Mecca.

nothingness as he created a city out of the barren sands of a desert. Ultimately, Lamya asks God to accept this self-sacrifice of writing a memoir, in which she completely divulges herself, in which she bears witness for the sake of the *tout-autre*, saying "It's for You, God, that I make this sacrifice". In turn, and through Hajar, Lamya, becomes a shaheed and a shahed, witness and martyr, simultaneously.

As discussed, Derrida's *tout-autre* and Eagleton's God reject Abraham's sacrificial offer because there could have been no hope of remuneration; Abraham's act had been done without calculation. Lamya asks: Why? Calculation ought to take priority over a revelation which commands something as murderous as the sacrifice of one's son, as one's self, for which there can be no remuneration or reward. Lamya reads the whole revelation as a test: a test to see if Abraham gives priority to his own intellect before revelation. Abraham failed because he dismissed his intellect. God's non-reward for this failure was the rejection of the sacrifice; and then God uses this opportunity as a moment of instruction, asking Abraham to slaughter a lamb and feed it to the poor, reminding Abraham that his main responsibility is always to the other. In the language of queer relationality, Lamya interprets this sacrifice to highlight that a priori: one is relational. Or in other words, an antirelational attitude to the other would bring only nothingness, as one is always already relational. That should have been Abraham's priority, not blind submission to a revelation he received in his dream, thinks Lamya.

D) The Whale: Jonah's Calculated Self-Sacrifice and Lamya H's Force of Non-Violence

As suggested, Muslim queer relationality on Lamya's terms begins with revelation, but never ends with it. For one thing, revelation ought to centralize relationality, not exclude it, because

ontologically, relationality is how Lamya lives the world. Abraham's prioritization of revelation over relationality is non-calculative, in this sense. Lamya believes that it is possible not to dismiss calculation as unholy. Our power of judgement takes precedence over revelation, believes Lamya, because revelation is the exception, not the rule. The rule is the human power of judgement, instilled into us from day one, which, unlike revelation, is also bodily experienced, she thinks. Therefore, calculation takes precedence. This is, Lamya thinks, the reason why Yunus prioritizes himself. After preaching for years to people who would never listen to his calls for justice, one day, "Yunus essentially gives up. He preaches about Islam[76] to his people, but they don't listen to him so he decides he's done and he leaves. He gets on a boat and sails away. He gives up!" (263). Lamya begins the chapter by saying that because Yunus leaves the struggle and gives up, he "isn't that special" (263). But she ends the chapter by rethinking her approach to Yunus and concluding that like Yunus, one ought to be selective in choosing one's fights. One ought to prioritize oneself, or else risk sacrificing one's life completely in the path to truth, or God; this is morbid, she thinks, because violence against oneself is the same as violence against the other.

Judith Butler defines non-violence as:

> Nonviolence is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity. When the precarious expose their living status to those powers that threaten their very lives, they engage a form of persistence that holds the potential to defeat one of the guiding aims of violent power-namely, to cast those on the margins as

[76] This mights seem anachronistic, but the idea that pre-Mohammadan prophets preached Islam appears in the Quran: since there has always been only one god, religion has always been only one and the same think, which Quran describes as Islam, which among other things, means submission.

> dispensable, to push them beyond the margins into the zone of non-being, to use Fanon's phrase (Butler, Force of Nonviolence, 24).

It is under the same aegis of non-violence that I study queer Muslim memoirs, as the exhibition of the living status of the marginalized against "powers that threaten their very lives," (24) in a way that is nonviolent. I argue that Muslim memoirs engage in witnessness straddling the fine line between martyrdom and silence. First, they refuse to engage in sacrifice violently. Dying for one's truth for them is like, Shariati characterizes that kind of death: simply "bequeathing one's life as recompense for the inadequacies of life and our being" (Khodsazi-e Enghelabi 25). Second, they refuse to remain silent despite the harms that being vocal might incur on them In this way, they bear witness to their truth and thus, as Butler says, engage in a form of persistence that has the ability to overcome one of the primary objectives of violent force, that is to portray those on the fringes as expendable and to further marginalize them into "the zone of non-being". Lamya performs witnessness in her fight against homophobia, Islamophobia, and her own marginalization, but she does this calculatively. She writes a memoir rather than come out directly to people she fears coming out to – her biological family among others. She writes under a pseudonym rather than with her real name, not willing to risk complete disclosure of her identity. She walks the fine line between martyrdom and victimization – self-sacrificial violence and utter silence. As mentioned, Lamya extracts this method of coming out from the Quran just as much as she extracts it from her own daily bodily experiences.

Seldom does Lamya use imagery to illustrate her meaning, but the whale that swallowed Yunus becomes her central image when describing a theory of protection in transmitting the truth. She compares living in a whale with writing under a pseudonym: "not giving up, not punishment, but rather, protection" like that a whale can provide which would

allow her to keep fighting: “to fight with my writing” (277). This whale is one that allows her to conserve her energy for “curious, kind dialogue” and not for homophobes or Islamophobes who “could look up where I live, where I work, who and what I hold dear” (277). She develops this imagery by implying that writing a memoir is like engaging in “whale song – with others in their own whales, in their own communities, fighting battles of their own”. She further illustrates that in this protection, she works on her own “racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia … anti-Blackness” by asking God for help, like Yunus who from his own whale, prayed to God as “*La illaha illa anta subhanaka inni kuntu min athalimeen,*” which translates to [I bear witness that] There is no God but You, Allah. Glory be to You. I have been of those who have done wrong (279).

As such, Lamya brings her memoir to an end. In doing so, she embodies Judith Butler's concept of nonviolence—not as a passive surrender but as a dynamic assertion of life and worth. Lamya’s act of writing, especially under a pseudonym, is an act of nonviolence in itself, as it creates a space where her Muslim queer identity can assert its existence against forces that would rather render it invisible or invalid and keep safe her queer relations too. This memoir serves as a testament to her relationality, her connection with both her own identity and the broader community, standing firmly against the push towards the ‘zone of non-being’. It is a delicate balance, akin to the Islamic concept of shahada, where she navigates the precarious line between martyrdom and witnessness, between the violence inflicted upon her community and the silence imposed by society. Her words are a form of resistance, a refusal to be erased, and in sharing her narrative, Lamya ensures that her story and the stories of others like her are recognized, valued, and grieved when lost. Her memoir,

therefore, becomes an act of defiance, a powerful declaration of existence, and an embodiment of nonviolent resistance, echoing their sacred affirmation of shahada, Muslim Witnessness.

Conclusion

As I conclude this dissertation, the Middle East finds itself once again beset on all sides by war. In the Gaza Strip, more than 32,430 Palestinians, at least 21,000 of whom were women and children, have died at the hands of IDF during Israel's retaliatory war. More than 74,000 people have been injured. More than half of Gaza homes, equivalent to 360,000 residential units, have been destroyed. With Western countries cutting aid to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, famine has slowly taken hold of the Gaza Strip. A genocide is being perpetrated against the Palestinian people.

Genocide is the culmination of a systematic and gradual escalation of deeply entrenched prejudiced attitudes, acts of prejudice, discrimination, and ultimately, discriminatory violence. It is a process rooted in the cultural fabric of society. It often begins with the subtle normalization of bigotry and xenophobia, which gradually intensifies into overt acts of prejudice. Discrimination, both institutional and social, further marginalizes certain groups, leading to a climate where violence is not only conceivable but also justified. The final stage, genocidal violence, is the outcome of this progressive dehumanization and vilification of a particular group, where the eradication of their identity and existence becomes a sanctioned act, maintained by the status quo. Thus, genocide reflects deep-seated cultural and social dynamics that have been allowed to fester and escalate unchecked.

As we mark the 45th anniversary of the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the prescient warnings of Said still ring true. Said's critical examination of Orientalism – the Western approach to dominate, structure, and assert authority over the Orient – finds a disturbing resonance in the way the Palestinian situation, particularly the genocide in Gaza, has been handled. The corporate institution of Orientalism, as Said describes, involves constructing narratives about the East that serve to justify Western hegemony and

intervention. In the case of Palestine, these narratives often paint a picture of an inherently tumultuous and backward region, thereby rationalizing extreme measures, including military action and political neglect. This institutionalized way of viewing and interacting with the Orient, as Said argues, extends beyond mere prejudice to actively shape policy and public opinion. It creates a lens through which the plight of the Palestinians is often viewed not as a humanitarian crisis demanding urgent action, but as an almost inevitable outcome of what is perceived as their intrinsic cultural and political makeup. This dehumanization and simplification of complex societies contribute to a world order where extreme acts, like genocide, can be overlooked, excused, or inadequately addressed. Said's critique urges us to recognize and challenge these deep-rooted biases and structures of power.

Throughout this dissertation my attempt has been to demonstrate that Muslim queer literature provides a unique perspective to learn about such prejudices. Such literature, which has experienced a significant resurgence marked by a surge in publications over the past six years, has provided a lens to study how Islam and queer have come to be known as intrinsically incompatible. Due to reasons I have delineated in my discussion of shahada, these works, have often been in the autobiographical voice, each in their own way delineating the intersectional violence arising from an approach that refuses to see queer and Muslim as compatible. These memoirs, however, show that expressing one's own gender, racial, sexual identities verge on a radical sacrifice, but nonetheless, still they bear witness to the intersectional violence threatening the livelihood of all queer Muslim subjects. In my discussion of Lamya H's *Hijab Butch Blues*, I have shown how the author dispels the false pretenses of such incompatibility by showing how an Islamically-mediated queer desire can manifest itself.

I delve into outlining the development of Muslim queer theology against Orientalist readings of Muslimhood, which I characterize as oscillating between two extremes of Muslim apologism and Muslim exceptionalism: the former claiming that Islam is essentially democratic, the latter arguing that Muslim-majority nations are exceptionally resistant to democracy. Both these narratives try in vain to pin down the essence of the Muslim (desiring) subject to religion, centralizing Islam to the subject's notion of itself. Through Bayat, I argue that, notwithstanding these dichotomies, in queer Muslim memoirs, queer Muslim subjects, such as Lamya H, are expressing their positionality through a non-normative Islamically-mediated queer desire. Through Rhouni's idea of a post-foundationalist engagement with Islamic texts, I show how Muslim queer subjects can avoid the inevitability of resorting to scripturalist means to understand Islam. Learning from the such freedom movements, as the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement and Jineolojî, I argue that A post-Islamist, post-foundationalist Muslim queer theology can place feminism in dialogue with Muslim studies, carving its own eclectic understanding democratic freedom in the MENA region and Muslim subjectivity in diaspora.

In the third chapter, my focus shifts to examining the Islamic principle of shahada, reconceptualized as a methodological tool for exploring Muslim intersubjectivity. I engage with Ali Shariati's interpretation of shahada, which he views as a form of stubborn defiance against both isolated forms of spirituality (absolute witnessness) and self-sacrificing expressions of faith (martyrdom). I build on this theory by juxtaposing it with contemporary theories, notably Dabashi's re-interpretation of Shi'ism, which he views as a perpetually revolutionary religion. Returning to the framework of post-Islamism, shahada emerges as a manifestation of active citizenry, paralleling Manouchehri's notion of civil spirituality. This

concept of spirituality, as advocated by Shariati (within is triad of "spirituality, equality, and freedom"), prioritizes commitment to the well-being of civil society. Through this lens, I interpret shahada in a literary context. Here, Muslim memoirs are seen as a vehicle of nonviolent resistance, in the vein of Judith Butler's definition, to fatalism and martyrdom, serving as a medium for active citizenship and the exercise of civil spirituality. I define this process as shahada, or Muslim witnessness – a testimonial act that confronts violence and advocates for other marginalized societal groups.

In the fourth chapter, I engage with the question: How is it possible to study desire in contemporary times, especially given the omnipresent grasp of neoliberal rationality? In response, I outline the study of queer theory as a major contribution to the study of desire through queer theory's exclusionary practices and prejudices. Through subjectless critique one can examine what queer theory has historically excluded from its purview of anti/non-normative queer desire: the type of homonormativity that it falls prey to by dismissing non-white, non-able-bodied, and nonsecular subjects of desire. In this context, I present Muslim queer relationality as a particular force of resistance, which in Foucauldian terms, challenges the prevailing 'regimes of truth'. This approach aligns with Foucault's notion of 'biopower' and 'governmentality', whereby Muslim queer relationality disrupts the norms imposed by dominant power structures on bodies and identities. It subverts the neoliberal rationality that seeks to categorize and control desire, presenting an alternative space where desire is fluid and unconfined by conventional boundaries. Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self' further illuminates how Muslim queer individuals actively construct their identities and resistances, molded by power, yet crafting their own narratives and modes of existence. This resistance is not just a rejection of normative constraints, but a proactive creation of new

forms of subjectivities that defy the simplistic categorizations of neoliberal and homonormative discourses.

Finally, in the last chapter, where these theories crystallize in the memoir written under the pseudonym Lamya H, I argue that *Hijab Butch Blues* engages in a reparative hermeneutics of The Quran, excavating the layers of the text through the stories of prophets and her own embodied experience as a Muslim queer of colour. Equating the moment of revelation with the moment one becomes conscious of their sexual/racial/gender/class identity, Lamya H sketches a mode of spiritual activism aligned with the theories of shahada delineated previously. Her queer anti-normative application of Quranic narratives, from identifying Maryam as lesbian to characterizing the djinn as the racial minority of creation, from reading The Quran as though it were Muhammad's memoir to centralizing marginal Quranic figures (like Hajar and Asiyah), from developing a theory of the Islamic closet through revelation, to acting upon revelation by being politically active, throughout this memoir, Lamya H develops a theory of shahada that tries to unveil the intersectional violence inflicted on Muslim queer desiring subjects. She divulges the discriminatory practices of religious fundamentalism, homonormativity, and neoliberal rationality, all while offering an alternative vision of empowerment and resistance through a reimagined understanding of faith, identity, and community.

Amidst the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, a compelling avenue for future research emerges. Jineolojî, with its vibrant interplay of feminism, culture, and resistance within Islamic societies, offers a rich body of knowledge for exploration. This movement's intersectional approach – weaving together strands of gender, faith, and ethnicity – presents a unique opportunity to understand resistance not in the context of MENA complexities. Additionally, there lies an uncharted territory in examining how Muslim queer literature in

diaspora, such as Lamya H's works, intersect with these socio-political movements in the MENA region. Is there a thread that connects the narratives of Muslim queer identities in diaspora with the struggle and resistance in the region? How is Islamically-mediated queer desire making a resurgence in the literature of the region?

It is my hope that this research serves as a stepping stone for future researchers to investigate deep-lying forces of discrimination that people on the margins of Muslim culture face, particularly in the context of ongoing geopolitical conflicts and social movements. The exploration of how marginalized voices, including queer Muslims, navigate and resist systemic oppressions can shed light on broader patterns of exclusion and marginalization within and beyond Muslim societies. Future studies could delve into how cultural narratives, religious interpretations, and social norms converge to shape the experiences of those at the periphery, offering insights into the complexities of identity and belonging. Ultimately, the goal should be to not only highlight the struggles of those on the fringes of Muslim culture but also to celebrate their resilience and agency.

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