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Sexual politics

Rainbows and Weddings

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Just three days before the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision to legalize same sex marriage, president Obama ordered that an undocumented transgender woman be escorted out of the White House Pride celebration because she interrupted the President to raise her voice against the state-sanctioned torture and deportation of LGBT people.

“You are in my House...you should be ashamed of yourself,” scolded the President as gay people in the audience cheered “We love you Obama!” This single event represents everything that went wrong with the gay rights movement in the United States. As a queer person from Pakistan, I wonder today: what happened that a potentially radical movement ended up in assimilationist notions of Pride parades and Marriage Equality?

Let's begin with some contextualization. Historian of gay rights John D'Emilio argues that gay men and women have not always existed as an identity. Rather, a specifically “gay” identity is as much a product of history as anything else. [1] In the 19th century, as wage labor spread and production grew specialized it became possible to release sexuality from the imperative to procreate. A capitalist order allowed people to organize their lives and experiences around the idea of same sex eroticism, and hence emerged the “gay identity” and politics based on sexual identity.

The discursive creation of “sexuality” is inevitably tied to medical and psychiatric fields that popularized the use of terms like “heterosexual” and “homosexual” to cater to the need of categorizing and comprehending the human sexual experience. These terms and the associated praxis on sexuality in fact emerged in the late 19th century and began to carve out the figure of the “homosexual.”

Our story starts when the Stonewall Riots in 1969 were coopted by cisgender white gay people and turned into what is now the Gay Rights movement.

The riots led by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, transgender women of color activists, were among many protests against police brutality — which has an even older history in the United States. Four years after Stonewall, Sylvia Rivera warned that the movement was inching towards a “middle class, white club” and she was subsequently proven right.

The popular narrative states that the nation plunged into a debate about homosexuality as gay politicians like Harvey Milk gained popularity and the American Psychological Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its list of disorders. Thus, after a painful struggle the “progressive” and “enlightened” people were able to win gay and lesbian rights in the United States. (This conveniently ignores the work of Black gay civil rights activists like James Baldwin and lesbian womanists like Audre Lorde, who envisioned queer liberation and justice for everyone much before the mainstream gay rights movement capitalized on it.)

Fast forward to the 1990s and onwards, when gay rights became a profitable business with people like Ellen DeGeneres “coming out” on national media. A culture emerged based on visibility politics that constituted an essential element of the emerging neoliberal discourse on queer politics. Myriad corporations joined hands to give birth to the “rainbow industry” and began sponsoring pride parades, while liberal efforts aimed at getting legislation like marriage equality approved.

In recent years, white celebrities like Lady Gaga popularized the “Born This Way” discourse that defined the “authentic queer experience.” As of today, gay people have become the basis of big businesses in the United States,

and the media and corporations have extensive campaigns to cater to the gay demographic. It is painfully obvious why politicians like Barack Obama used the gay vote to not only gain power but also export a specific version of LGBT rights around the world.

The watershed moment that placed LGBT rights on the mainstream global human rights agenda was Hillary Clinton's address to United Nations in December 2011 on the anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when she came out in support of the "global LGBT community" in a speech that declared gay rights as human rights.

Clinton called the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people "universal" and criticized nations that criminalize gay behavior or tolerate abuse of LGBT people. The then Secretary of State declared it a "violation of human rights" to commit violence or discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation.

In order to understand why the United States is at the forefront of the Gay Rights movement in global politics we need to locate it in the history of U.S. imperialism. The relation between empire and sexuality is a complex one, and before we attempt to find answers by dissecting this intersection between power, race, gender, and sexuality, it is important to ask the right questions.

Why the need to universalize LGBT rights? What assumptions underlie a universal framework of LGBT rights and how do these emerge? Why is there an attempt to situate LGBT rights as a modern institution against an oppressive tradition? Why is there a need for a global LGBT community? What, if anything, is a global LGBT community?

Edward Said defines imperialism as a two-way system. "Life in one subordinate realm of experience is imprinted by the fictions and follies of the dominant realm. But the reverse is true, too, as experience in the dominant society comes to depend uncritically on natives and their territories perceived as in need of la mission civilisatrice."

Seeing natives as in need of civilization is essentially the idea at the core of colonial enterprise. Post-colonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak extended this analysis of imperialism to feminism by highlighting the idea of colonizers "saving" oppressed women. Colonial discourse on feminism is predicated on the idea of "white women saving brown women from brown men."

The classic essay of Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," sheds light on how veiling was associated with oppression by the French colonizers, and how Muslim women were symbolically unveiled by them as a means of legitimizing the colonial mission. The British Empire replicated the same model in India and Egypt.

In the context of the War on Terror, this colonial feminism became especially pronounced. Its critique by authors like Lila Abu Lughod, Chandra Mohanty and Saba Mahmood is important because the idea of Muslim women in need of saving became one of the war's driving logics. The burqa was seen as an oppressive institution imposed on Afghan women by the Taliban. Afghan women were seen as a homogenous group that existed in a historical vacuum being oppressed by men and a "misogynist culture," a logic that legitimized the exercise of violence against the demonized "others."

The Bush administration essentially legitimized the Afghan war by speaking on behalf of Afghan women, thus situating them as in need of saving from the Taliban. Local Afghan women's rights organizations like RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan) that opposed U.S. intervention were completely silenced.

There are mountains of evidence that this B-52 Bomber Feminism (as Rafia Zakaria appropriately terms it), instead of doing the promised good, actually brought more harm to the cause of women rights in Afghanistan.

Rainbows and Weddings

The same logic applied in different ways to the discourse around LGBT rights. As Deepa Kumar puts it, "In the Obama era, liberalism has become even more intertwined with empire." Joseph Massad extends the Spivakian formula:

"(B)rown women (gay and straight) and brown gay men (located in the western and northern European and the U.S. metropole and those who work for NGOs with west and north European and U.S. funding in their home countries), and their white allies of all genders and sexualities, are engaged in saving brown women (straight; and gay;) and brown straight; men (in the Third World and in western and northern Europe and the United States) from brown straight; men [and] this has become a huge industry."

Those who are called or self-identify as "gay" in Third World countries are portrayed as oppressed and in need of "liberation." Muslim heterosexual men are the homophobic and transphobic demonized "others" who need to be controlled and stopped. Such discourse itself creates a presumed global LGBT community on the basis of "shared grievances," where in fact there exists no global community with the same experiences of persecution.

Headlines like "ISIS kills Gays" and "Iran Hangs Gay Men" circulate in the global media to pressure the states into accepting a universal framework of LGBT rights and put the United States in a superior position. This is not to say that many Muslim heterosexual men are not "homophobic" or that ISIS does not kill gay people, but rather that there is a specific context behind this persecution and the process of creation of news that is coopted to aid imperialist narratives.

In a context where militant groups fling bodies from towers as a provocation and militaries from the Global North rush to save them, the essential question is who "owns" queer bodies? Saleem Haddad correctly points out that queer people in such contexts face a "dual struggle." Queer people in Third World countries cannot even talk about their trauma without it being hijacked by the liberal savior complex.

The network of global human rights organizations that advocate LGBT rights, what Joseph Massad calls the Gay International, works under the assumption that Muslim "LGBTQ people" need to be saved from their own oppressive traditions.

An example is the reaction of organizations like British-based Outrage! and Paris-based IDAHO to the alleged public hangings of two Iranian "gay youth" in the city of Mashad in 2005. There was an international call for protests and condemnation to these public hangings and several U.S. and Europe based gay rights organizations endorsed this call. Amnesty International later reported that the men under question were found guilty of raping a 13-year-old boy and were under custody for 14 months.

These were not the first hangings, nor is Iran the only country that can be accused of hate crimes against "gay people." One might question, why Iran? Why at that particular time? There was no such response from Gay International after the Abu Ghraib prison abuse reports came out, nor when brown bodies became the subject of torture and rape in Bagram Prison in Afghanistan.

The logic underlying the international call for condemnation of crimes against queer people is guided by the imperialist project in the sense that the dominant power chooses which bodies and sexualities need to be 'saved' and which homophobic Muslims need to be civilized. Iran was the subject of international scrutiny because the Bush administration declared it to be a member of the "axis of evil."

The Islamophobic logic that dictated the War on Terror was the precise reason that homosexuality was used as a tool of torture when U.S. soldiers used rape to break the "modest, nudity-shy, homophobic Arab." The imperialist project in exercising control over brown bodies and sexualities constructed an orientalist narrative of the "effeminate" Arab

man, presenting him as someone who is scared of homosexuality.

This effectively re-juvenates the centuries-old colonial ideology of the hyper-masculine dominant colonizer capturing and raping the feminine, weak, and inviting colony. Another example is some European countries using the “gay test” as a citizenship requirement for Muslims that involves judging the reaction of applicants to a picture of gay men kissing.

The liberal discourse of LGBT rights is at the center of this civilizing mission that makes the call for saving the “oppressed” and “persecuted” LGBT youth of Muslim countries. Massad correctly points out that “it is the very discourse of Gay International, which produces homosexuals, and gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology.”

For instance, categories like Hijra in South Asia, Two-Spirit among Native Americans, and Muxe in Mexico pre-date colonial times. The complex history and experiences associated with these identities is usually erased by imposition of the “transgender” label without input or self-identification from local queer people. It is important to note that people actively choose to identify as “transgender” as well, and a nativist misunderstanding of the aforementioned argument leads to erasure of such identities.

This savior mission conveniently ignores the local context in Third World countries and poses “LGBT rights” as a movement isolated from local politics. I have argued elsewhere that there exists an extensive history of what is today termed “LGBTQ community” in South Asia. This rich history cannot be reduced to labels of “gay” or “transgender” (because there is a politics to these labels as pointed out earlier), but one can observe the equilibrium in which the South Asian society existed where what we term as “queer people” had a specific place even if one argues that it was marginalized.

The culture was definitely hetero-patriarchal and people were persecuted on the basis of “deviancy,” but the equilibrium that existed was completely destroyed by the British colonizers who labeled the Hijra people as a criminal class under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 and criminalized homosexuality (the law that still exists in penal codes today). In doing so, they created “homosexuality” in South Asia as a specific practice divorced from the South Asian experience of the sexual and the intimate.

It is utterly ironic that not a hundred years ago the West tried to “civilize” us by criminalizing homosexual conduct, and now the West wishes to “civilize” us by decriminalizing the homosexual conduct that it criminalized in the first place, all the while producing us as the “barbarians” that they have the duty to correct.

It is even more ironic that while the U.S. state uses marriage equality to present itself as more “progressive” than Third World countries, it has done next to nothing to tackle issues like racism, classism, homelessness, violence, health care, education, deportation, prisoner abuse — issues that need dire attention in LGBT communities and that activists have been highlighting for a long time. But these are not as profitable or costless to concede as marriage equality.

The argument here does not seek to trivialize marriage equality. The decision will definitely benefit many people. However, that should not erase the politics of marriage equality: how marriage equality became the funding priority, how it is embedded in capitalism and the corporations that profit from the struggles of queer people, how it represents the ideology of the mainstream Gay Rights movement and how it caters to imperialism.

Such legislation allows the state to extend its control over queer bodies and regulate their sexualities and gender identities. It erases the anger that disenfranchised queer people feel because many organizations have redirected

funds towards getting marriage equality approved, while queer people are dying because of racial violence and poverty.

The mainstream Gay Rights movement has allowed people like Tim Cook (the head of Apple) to become CEOs of massive corporations that exploit cheap labor, and politicians like Hillary Clinton to pinkwash themselves and market their image for their presidential campaigns. However, this movement mocks disenfranchised minorities. A protest that led to the emergence of Gay Rights was started by working class transgender women of color against police brutality and even today 72% of victims of anti-LGBTQ homicide are transgender women, and 89% of victims are people of color.

For South Asian activists fighting for queer liberation, it is extremely important to acknowledge that Gay Rights are not isolated from dominant structures in the society. Just as LGBT rights are embedded in imperialism and capitalism, this framework of rights reproduces other oppressive structures. If the “decadent queer” was an affront to the “true American culture” until queer people were deradicalized through an extensive liberal project and incorporated into the mainstream, now “gay” represents U.S. culture and queers have become the “acceptable citizens.”

Marriage equality is the successful attempt to deradicalize the queer who has far more radical demands like abolition of the prison industrial complex, state hegemony, capitalism, racism and imperialism. The state tells the queer subject that all he needs is the ability to marry like heterosexual people and have children to be happy. The homonormative queers — white suburban dads with their biracial adopted children — become the poster boys of the nationalist project.

Jasbir Puar was the first to name this phenomenon as “homonationalism.” These acceptable (homonationalist) queers are the ones who become part of oppressive structures rather than challenging them, and support and finance U.S. wars abroad to liberate their “fellow queers” in Third World countries.

Prior to marriage equality, it was the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy that was the concern of this homonationalist project. A massive amount of activism and corporate money went into getting the policy repealed so that gay people could also participate in the imperialist endeavors of the U.S. military. Becoming part of an army that uses heavily racialized discourse on “terrorism” to justify the rape, torture and murder of brown people allows gay people to become “patriotic citizens” for whom “equality” has come to mean the equal chance to bomb weddings and madrassahs.

The rainbow flag coupled with the American flag espousing this patriotic unity started to appear everywhere: in gay clubs, in gay gyms, on gay dating websites. After 9/11, it represented the systematic exclusion of “terrorist Muslims” from the national space, directly tied to “counter-terrorist efforts” that sanctioned imperialist wars which have killed four million Muslims over the space of two decades.

Perhaps the most notorious example of this homonationalism is Israel — of which the U.S. is the biggest ally. Extensive pinkwashing campaigns and ads that present Israel as the “gay heaven” and Palestinians as the “homophobic Arabs” are common, and the pink money from the emerging gay tourism industry directly finances Israeli settler colonialism.

None of these critiques are meant to overshadow or erase the experiences of persecution of South Asian “queer people” who have for decades been victims of hate crimes and state sanctioned persecution. For Khwaja-Sira and Hijra communities and self-identifying LGBT people, harassment, shaming, economic marginalization, sex trafficking, sexual violence and murder have become the lived reality. It is important for South Asian queer activists to realize, however, that imposition of external frameworks and legitimization of gay imperialism will only bring more harm to

local movements.

In his extensive critique of the current model of human rights, Eric Posner argues that imposing top-down models telling people to be “free” has caused more harm than good in Third World countries. It is important to locate the “homophobia” of a “tradition” in the context of the colonial past and the rainbow-washing carried out by the Gay International “and in the case of Pakistan, a U.S.-supported military dictatorship that strengthened the law criminalizing homosexuality.

Meddling in local movements for queer liberation around the world patronizes the local activists and hijacks the struggles of queer people, isolating them from local contexts for a convenient human rights agenda, thus jeopardizing any progress that has been made so far. We are still recovering from the damage caused by a single “Gay Pride” event organized by the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. [2]

As the rainbow industry globalizes and the debate about queer rights is popularizing in Third World countries, mainstream queer activists and allies in South Asia are adopting the neoliberal framework of LGBT rights that presents gay rights as an exceptional struggle somehow divorced from factors like class, caste, ethnicity, sect and nationality. This framework allows the extensive networks of external donors to shape local narratives of “queer life” and encourage, what Arundhati Roy calls the “‘NGOization’ of resistance,” empowering only a certain group of college educated, English-speaking urban gay elite who continue to strengthen their control over disenfranchised groups.

The most recent example of this is when a gay matrimonial ad that indicated caste preference appeared in an Indian newspaper and a corporate brand, Anouk Ethnic Apparel, cast a lesbian couple in an ad to market their product. There is no doubt that such ads “represent” queer people who have been erased for a long time, but such “representation” is done by corporations that are responsible for exploiting cheap labor. The only reason that such representation has become relevant right now is because it carries the potential for profit-making.

Such neoliberalization turns the political cause of queer liberation into an issue of “minority rights” that benefits only certain privileged groups. An elitist discourse on LGBT rights divorced from issues like class inequalities, sectarianism, caste oppression and ethnic cleansing keeps suppressing possibilities of a broader movement for social justice.

The queer movement in South Asia needs a radical reorientation. Instead of making, for instance, marriage as its main priority, there is a dire need to realize the intersectionality of oppressive structures. There is a need to decolonize the movement for queer liberation and transnational solidarity, and that begins when queer people collectively stand against all forms of structural violence in the society. There is no liberation for “us” until there is liberation for everyone.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] Editor’s note: D’Emilio does not argue that queer practices and identities began only in the late 19th century. Rather, he argues that “gay” identity as it is constructed in contemporary Western society is a recent development. Many other types of sexual and gender identities have existed in many other times and places.

[2] There was a dangerous backlash against the U.S. Embassy’s 2011 Gay Pride event in Karachi that endangered queer people, especially queer people from lower classes. This is one of the ways in which the event was harmful to local movements.