

# Paradoxical Representation of Queers in the Egyptian Movies versus the Islamic Ruling

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**Abstract:** This article examines how a Muslim society like Egypt represents queers—i.e. gays and lesbians—in their movies and how that representation is not symmetrical and still paradoxical. The movies examined here are the famous 1973 *Hammam Al-malality* (the Malality Bathroom), the 1977 *Qitta ala Naar* (A Rush Cat), the 2006 *Immart Yaccoubian* (Jacobean Building), and the 2009 *Bedoun Riqabaa* (without censorship). Queers presented in these movies are sometimes given a tragic end, which is usually suicide or murder, and sometimes are excused but yet not straightforwardly. On the other hand, the Islamic ruling against such acts of gayness and lesbianism is presented clearly so that it could, in a way or another, give an explanation of why such paradoxical movie representation exists.

**Keywords:** gayness, lesbianism, queers, Egyptian movies, Islamic ruling.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Miriam-Webster's Dictionary, queer theory is defined as "an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality." The earlier use for the word 'queer' was to describe anything 'odd' or 'different' in the society (Anderson 1). Later on, the word was considered to be a kind of insult to any non-heterosexual person. In the twentieth century, the word 'queer' was one of the most vernacular term of abuse used to describe homosexual people. (Anderson 2). Recently, the term has been given a new direction in the study of gender and sexuality in literature. Abundant number of researchers address theory of queer. In her *Home Homo on the Range: Male Intimacy and the Figure of Cowboy in Owen Wister and Charles Badger Clark*, Jennifer L. Anderson presents the history of the word 'queer' and all denotations, connotations and implications that have been attached to the term. Then, she presents different attempts of theorists to define the term 'queer' which all seem to not agree on one single or clear definition. Some of the theorists' attempts that Anderson presents is one by Patrick Dilley who claims that attempting to define queer theory is as "elusive to nail down as mercury" (4). Nikki Sullivan believes that the term is "sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledge and identities." (43-44).

While Sullivan claims that the term is an "indefinable," and Dilley believes it is "illusive," Others think that the term is too broad to include "some married couples without children ... or even (who knows) some married couples with children—with, perhaps, very naughty children" (Halperin 62). A question can be raised regarding the word 'queer;' if the word queer was used as a slang or abuse word towards homosexuals, why, then, does it take a new academic direction with positive connotation attached to it? Anderson claims that the word was intentionally used by gays and lesbians themselves to change its negative connotation into more positive one (3).

It is believed that queer theory was born from the womb of the gender and gay and lesbian studies. Moreover, it is believed that the theory heavily relies on deconstruction since it deals with the binary of homo- or hetero-sexuality. Out of the many definition-like attempts of the theorists to define queer theory, Annamarie Jagose in her *Queer Theory: An Introduction* introduces a working one here. She states that queer theory is "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times it is used to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies" (1).

## II. ISLAMIC RULING AGAINST GAYS AND LESBIANS

Muslims have three main sources of their Islamic Sharia rulings; Quran, Sunnah ‘prophetic teachings,’ and whatever the prophet’s companions or Muslim scholars agree upon. It is also not allowed in Islam to change anything in it, add to it, or remove from it. Muslims believe that the religion is complete, and God who created humankind and revealed the scriptures (Quran in the case of Muslims) to them knows what is going to happen to them till the Day of Judgment. The only thing that is allowed in Islam is the different interpretation of some verses of the Quran, and even these interpretations should be done by those who know it very well; namely the Islamic scholars. Once the majority of Muslim scholars agree upon something which is neoteric in the society, the ruling becomes an Islamic one that people are asked to abide by. The prophet said “My Ummah (people) all of them will never agree on aberration.” So, the interpretation on just one person or one scholar without an agreement from other scholars is not accepted in Islam.

The first source of the Sharia law which the Quran sets clear that a whole city was doomed to severe punishment due to their men’s gayness. Allah says:<sup>1</sup>

And [We had sent] Lot when he said to his people, “Do you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds? Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people.” But the answer of his people was only that they said, “Evict them from your city! Indeed, they are men who keep themselves pure.” So We saved him and his family, except for his wife; she was of those who remained [with the evildoers]. And We rained upon them a rain [of stones]. Then see how was the end of the criminals! (7:81-86).

In another verse, Allah says:

And [mention] Lot, when he said to his people, "Indeed, you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds. Indeed, you approach men and obstruct the road and commit in your meetings [every] evil." And the answer of his people was not but they said, "Bring us the punishment of Allah , if you should be of the truthful." He said, "My Lord, support me against the corrupting people." And when Our messengers came to Abraham with the good tidings, they said, "Indeed, we will destroy the people of that Lot's city. Indeed, its people have been wrongdoers."... Indeed, we will bring down on the people of this city punishment from the sky because they have been defiantly disobedient." And We have certainly left of it a sign as clear evidence for a people who use reason. (29: 28-35).

It is mentioned in the Quran that no one practiced this kind of homosexuality before the people of the prophet Lot and God descended different kinds of severe punishments on them. In the last quoted verse, God made them (people of Lot) a sign for anyone who wishes to do the same. In other words, it is clear that this kind of sex relation is totally prohibited in Islam. However, Lot’s people may have deserved all of these severe punishments not only because of gayness but because of other evil doings as well, but, verily, gayness was the most evil. Regarding lesbianism, Quran doesn’t mention any explicit ruling or punishment against it.

In the prophet’s teachings ‘hadeeths’, the prophet says “he who does what Lot’s people did is accursed” (Termedthi). In another hadeeth, the prophet states “Allah has cursed those who do what Lots’ people did” (Ahmed). Regarding lesbianism, the prophet says “lesbianism among women is a sort of adultery” (Tabarani). Explaining the effects of such queer relations, the prophet Muhammad states in another hadeeth that “people who announce their obscenity (queer sexual relations) in public will witness the spread of plague and other diseases that didn’t exist at the time of their predecessors.” (AL-Hakim). Nevertheless, Islam is against practicing such queer things in public and recommend those who practice prohibited doings to do it in secret and ask God for forgiveness with trying hard to stop it. Islam considers doing the prohibited things as sin and making it in public is another bigger sin. The prophet says “all my Ummah (people) are exempted (not taken accountable of sins) except those of the Mujahirin (those who commit a sin openly or disclose their sins to the people) (Bukhari and Muslim). The prophet’s companions and the scholars of Muslims all agreed that those who commit gayness and lesbianism should be punished, but had different views on how to punish them. Although the Islamic ruling is vividly clear towards queers, the Egyptian movies have paradoxical representation of them as follows.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Islamic Law, Quran is not translatable, only the meaning of the Quran could be translated.

### III. EXAMPLES FROM EGYPTIAN MOVIES

#### A. *Hammam Al Malality "Al Malality Bathroom":*

This movie does not have a clear attitude either for or against homosexuality. The character holds a social title 'beih' which indicates that he comes from a high social class. However, he goes to a public bathroom to 'hunt' poor men by paying them or offering them better places to live in. He meets the protagonist of the movie and falls in love with him. After a while, he reveals his problem to the protagonist and how he became such a homosexual. The tale starts by the homosexual destroying a picture of his mother while he is in an inside conflict. He blames his mother and thought she was the reason why he became such a queer. He says "She used to mollycoddle me until she spoils me." Keeping on, he explains that what he does is a scandal that his father 'escaped' when he learnt of his son's socially unaccepted queerness. His father "couldn't stand seeing his son this way." His mom took him to the psychiatrist who, in turn, informed them that his 'illness' is incurable. Consequently, his mom 'escaped,' too. Screaming loudly while unconsciously destroying everything around him, the homosexual says 'she leaves me in torture.'

Although the homosexuality problem seized a reasonable amount of time in this movie, the writer seems to fail in addressing the issue. First, the movie was produced in 1973, and that time was a time of war in Egypt, and there was no place for such 'mollycoddling' things. Second, the parents' situation is not very clear; we knew nothing about them but both 'escaped.' The movie doesn't tell us where they escaped to, and why they didn't escape together, and doesn't afford any rationale for the mother's love and mollycoddling of her son and her escape away from him at the same time. There is no connection between these two paradoxical actions in the movie. Third, the three people who were, according to the homosexual, the reasons for his problem: the father; the mother; and the psychiatrist all are referred to in a third-person pronoun (he and she) but never appear in the story. This doesn't persuade me as a reader or watcher because the homosexual might be utilizing them to justify his problem. The protagonist himself does not know if what he is doing right or wrong. In another interpretation of the perplexing presentation of the homosexual in the movie is that it represented the perplexing status in Egypt at that time. In a third one, it could be said that the writer couldn't fully be on the side of the homosexual and sympathizing with him because that movie was the first to deal with this problem in such a way, and the reaction of the audience and people of Egypt was not yet known or couldn't be totally predicted. That's why, in the movie that homosexual person was represented as both a victim and a victimizer. Either way, the sub-story of the gay person lacks objective correlatives in terms of T. S. Eliot's criticism of Shakespearean Hamlet. One can feel lost and not be able to either sympathize or condemn the actions of the gay person. In an ambiguous end, the gay gets killed. The story of homosexuality is a bit differently dealt with in another movie entitled *Qitta ala Naar (A Rush Cat)*.

#### B. *Qitta ala Naar "A Rush Cat":*

Four years later in 1977, after the status was settled in Egypt since the war was over and the country started to be better, the story of gayness is dealt with as a secondary or sub-story problem. Ezzat the homosexual guy is a friend to the protagonist of the movie and their friendship which might have been more-than-friendship remains unclear throughout the whole story. Ezzat commits suicide after his friend discovers that he is in a relation with another person. The protagonist stays sad till the end of the story, and a rumor spreads out that there was a sexual relation between Ezzat and the protagonist which annoys the protagonist's father who tries to investigate the situation with his son.

The father: were you in an 'unwanted' relation with Ezzat?

The protagonist: No, I was not. Who said so?

The father: every one is saying so. Maybe they are correct especially because your wife complains that you don't sleep with her on the same bed even before Ezzat commits suicide.

The protagonist: Liars ... liars, they lie to you. My problem with my wife is another story, and it has nothing to do with Ezzat. Ezzat was just a friend to me; my best and closest friend, indeed, and he didn't tell me anything about his 'unwanted' relations with other men.

The father: It would have been better if you advised him and helped him to overcome this!

Unlike the story in *Hamam Almalaity*, the gay here is presented as being odd, queer and unusual. He practices his queerness in the night while everyone else is sleeping and lights are off. The number of words that this character utters in the movie are a few. He neither justifies why he is doing such things nor is given a space to do so. The dialogue between

the father—who represents wisdom in the movie— and his son—who represents youth and impatience— reveals how much the society refuses a person who is queer and doesn't regret his death in whatever way. Death was the normal punishment for the 'sinner' in the movie which meets with the end of the other gay in Hammam Almalaity. This could be as a message from the writers that these actions are being rejected by the Egyptian society and those gay people have no room in the society.

**C. Imarat Yaccoubian “Jacobean Building”:**

The perspective in the 2006 *Jacobean Building* is different. The issue is pictured as something that exists in the society. Unlike *Hamam Almalaity* where the gay person blames his mother for his gayness, the gay here thinks he has the right to practice whatever he wishes. The dialogue looks persuasive when the gay meets a strong soldier and tries to appeal him to be his 'partner':

The gay: Drink this and you will feel you need to do 'something!'

The soldier: But my wife is not here. She is in a faraway city in the Upper Egypt.

The gay touching the leg of the soldier softly: Not all women are good to have a relation with. There is a better relation.

The soldier: But this is shameful and religiously prohibited.

The gay: Calm down! Calm down! Just come with me to have a rest until tomorrow. I know you have no other place to go to.

The dialogue between the gay who is presented to be a rich gentleman with a social title (pasha) and the soldier who seems to be a layman with a poor level of education is nontraditional. The gay has a strong belief in what he is doing and it seems that most of those around him know that. Taking the soldier into his own luxurious apartment, the gay meets his neighbor at the elevator. The neighbor understands why the soldier, who is wearing normal clothes by now, is accompanying the man, and ironically praises his actions.

When they enter the apartment, the first scene that encounters the audience is a big library, in an indication that gayness is not an illness as the previous movies claim. After the first bed meeting between the two, the soldier feels so sorry for doing this and calls it 'impurity.' The gay 'assures' the soldier saying "you are a poor ill-minded Upper Egyptian guy. Do you think it is only me and you who do so? No, it is everywhere, here, in Europe, America, and the gulf countries, and in all the world." The gay screams "what is wrong with a man loving another man?" and repeats this several times. The gay paves the way that it is normal to do such things, and those who practice it are normal people. By so doing, he is invading the 'stereotype' that the Egyptian people have about this issue. Not only this, but he also tries to assure the poor soldier that this is not against religion. But against the religion is the adultery since there is an outcome of an adultery, which is a child. But it is impossible in case of a man-man relation. Gradually, the soldier becomes totally satisfied with the relationship, and moves to sit in a small apartment given to him by the gay. This could be interpreted as an indication that the educated gay defeats the society stereotype presented by the soldier.

The story in movie goes on, and the Islamic punishment occurs to the soldier whose little child dies from a severe fever. This was a shock for the soldier who repents to God and leaves the gay for good. It is also a contradiction in the story since after the audience get convinced that being gay is something normal and should be accepted, everything turns upside down by the death of the child which is clear that his death is a punishment, and a call for return to the normal way of 'bed' relations that produces the seeds for children to come. The death of the child is also an objective correlative that delivers a warning that it is either way, the way that produces children 'man-woman relationship' or the way of punishment 'man-man relationship.' The gay's alleged love for the soldier is soon exposed to be false when the gay finds someone else to practice homosexuality with.

The end of the gay in this movie is no better than the end of the other two gays in the previous two movies; the same fate is awaiting him. The new person that gay finds to practice homosexuality with turns out to be a thief who kills him with his belt, after the gay submits himself to, and steals his belongings. Right before the scene of murder, the gay utters non-understandable foreign or French-like words in a reference from the writer that these queer practices are alien to the Egyptian society and should be terminated. However, only one excuse is given to the gay for being so. It is in a flashback to his childhood when his father was busy all the time with his (father's) French wife and never paid attention or cared

about his son. Until one day when one of the servants engaged him in a homosexual act. Memorizing all of this, the gay starts to shed tears and removes his father's and his French wife's pictures from the wall and takes them to the garbage. This raises a question which is what if the gay's father was kind to him and the servant didn't practice the homosexuality with him, would he now be gay? The movie does not provide a clear answer to this question but represents a paradox. In the beginning of the story, it seems that the gay is very convinced that what he is doing is normal and that many other people do the same. He attempts to convince the soldier to this. Later, he sheds tears for being a gay and blames his father for that!

#### D. *Bedoun Raqaba "Without Censorship":*

Unlike the previous three movies which deal with gayness, this 2009 movie deals with lesbianism. A college girl who lives with her friends away from her parents is trying to attract girls to practice lesbianism with. In a poor dramatic story, the girl is convinced that what she is doing is right. In a dialogue with a male friend of her, the man asks:

The man: why do you practice such things with girls?

The lesbian with a deep breath and a soft voice: because this is a completely different thing. Men will never be able to feel it.

The man: When did you start practicing such things?

The lesbian: Since I was in grade four... May God curse the girl who taught me such things; my cousin.

The lesbian seems to have a normal bed relation with men, but she enjoys women-women relations more. In a paradoxical representation, she curses the girl who taught her such things, yet she enjoys it.

The whole story of the movie is impertinent and doesn't reflect the traditions of the Egyptian life. It is extremely unusual and illegal in Egypt for unmarried men and women to live in the same apartment, but they are in the movie. Subsequently, the story loses its credibility and offers no logical treatment for the issue. The movie starts and ends with the lesbian living normally and offers neither punishment nor credit for her lesbianism.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The representation of the queers remains paradoxical and not clear in the Egyptian movies due to the general religious attitudes of Egyptians and to their knowledge of the Islamic rulings against such homosexuality. Many Egyptian movies discuss the issue implicitly as in *Al-Tariq Al-Masoud* "The blocked Path" which was the first ever Egyptian movie that discusses queers. Briefly, the movie, in a few seconds, presents a lesbian while trying to attract girls. But the movie doesn't show any prejudice or pride of her. Another movie that discusses the same issue is the 1990 *Alraqessa wa Alsiasi* "The Dancer and the Politician" which also briefly and implicitly shows how gays dress and talk. More movies include the 1978 *Asauod Ela Alhawiya* "Climbing to the Abyss," the 1979 *Iskandariaa Lieh?* "Why Alexandria?," the 1992 *Al Erhab Wa Alkabab* "Terrorism and Kebab," the 2003 *Dail Alsamaka* "The Fish's Tail," and the 2007 *Heena Maysara* "Till a Solution," and finally the 2014 *Asrar Aieliya* "Family secrets." All these movies had something to say about homosexuals but never agree on the same presentation. The homosexual persons were sometimes pictured as victimizers that the society should be cleaned off of and were given punishments by dooming them to death as in *Hamam Al-Malaity*, *Qitta Ala Nar*, and *Omart Yacoubian*. In the other movies, they are given seemingly normal lives. In either case, the characters that represent homosexuals blame others (usually their parents) for what they became. Sometimes, they are socially rejected and in other examples they are not. In some cases, they are dealt with as people with an illness and sometimes not. The near future may witness more of dramatic treatments of queers which might have a more clear representation.

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