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Transgender Issues in the North African/Southwest Asian/Arabian Region

In examining such issues as those pertaining to the transgender identity and community in the United States, it is easy to assume that, perhaps, said issues are still not widely understood or accepted, or, in broader terms, accepted. Indeed, in the West, generally speaking, transgender issues are often mistakenly considered something of an exclusively modern issue: that, due to the explosion of the sexuality revolution of the twentieth century, matters concerning gender deviance must be solely based in those countries whose social, cultural, and even economic and technological innovation are far above those in any other region of the world. If anything, in the context of the modernized and culturally diverse status of the United States, one probably also considers the allegedly free, contemporary, and open country to be a model for the rest of the world in dealing (or not dealing) with said issues.

However, this is not the case. If anything, the United States represents only a very minute and somewhat distorted and limited portion of the world. Really, it is only given any sense of preference in terms of visibility and popularity because of its overall economic power and insistence in its own strength and dominance: characteristics that, in the end, can actually be viewed as monopolistic. The United States, in other words, capitalizes on the dominating image it crafted for itself in taking charge of such popular media as film, television, and print. As a global power, the United States holds a certain weight and plays a significant role in what is normalized in the West. Additionally, as the West is more or less considered, in some sense, again, the most powerful region in the world, what is normalized in said region is ultimately recognized (namely, by those who reside in the West or who consume Western products and information), as the standard by which all regions must live. As the West, and, to reiterate, primarily the United States, receives the most exposure in terms of popular media, the illusion of absolute correctness and monopoly over cultural, economic, and technological standards is, in a sense, successfully fabricated.

In reality, though - and, perhaps quite simply and obviously - the United States, as representative of the West, is not the only region in the world in which culture is consumed and produced. Moreover, hardly is it a place that is as rich in history as some of its more Eastern, foreign, and less visible counterparts. In fact, in comparison to a number of different locations on the planet - that is to say, compared to various older and more singular cultures found in other regions in the world - the West is somewhat wanting in a unified and extensive history.

Such cultures that are found in such regions as North Africa, Arabia, and Southwest Asia, in particular, hold far older and elaborate traditions than those that are found in the Western hemisphere. Indeed, by and large - and, in the case of transgender issues, specifically - this area on the globe, especially, is comprised of a number of different, unique cultures each of which has its own very non-ideally Western attitudes towards matters concerning transgender issues. Essentially, in examining rituals and other various religious practices that are greatly at odds with those that are to be found in the infinitely diverse and more modernized Western hemisphere, the aforementioned regions (or region, really, as they all, more or less, occupy much of the same area) are found to represent almost completely different perspectives on transgender subject matter. Ultimately, it is deduced that, again, the United States, and its allied Western cultures, are of only one very specific attitude towards the transgender community. In order to

reach a higher and more accurate, as well as more globally focused, understanding of transgenderism, it is essential that one also studies cultures of different regions; namely, those of North Africa, Arabia, and Southwest Asia.

To begin with, it is most important to come to a wider, more general understanding of such terms that pertain to transgenderism. In broader terms, and in the context of the current subject matter, the word "transgenderism,&#65533; in particular, will always refer to ideas of gender deviance. That is to say, transgenderism is used when discussing any conception of gender that does not abide by the prescribed and very Western imagining of the gender binary. In addition - that is, contrary to what is widely believed in much of Western society - this idea of gender deviance is not limited to the practice of anatomical alteration (or undergoing surgery to achieve complete and physical gender change). According to gender theorist and psychologist Connie Rogers, in more accurate and widely encompassing terms, transgenderism is an especially large umbrella under which fall such identities or classifications as cross-dressing (where the individual - most likely due more in part to such matters pertaining to sexuality rather than gender - dresses in clothing that is usually deemed representative of the opposite gender), inter-sexuality (where the individual in question was born with both male and female reproductive organs), and trans-sexuality (where the individual in question identifies as the gender that was not assigned to them, biologically and anatomically speaking, at birth).

Moreover, what is perhaps as equally important as understanding the rudimentary definition of transgenderism is the very basic idea of the history of transgenderism. In simpler terms, says Joanne Meyerowitz, author of *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, transgenderism, again, is not an entirely new concept; rather, it is a concept that has existed over many centuries in such Eastern regions as North Africa, Arabia, and Southwest Asia. If anything, it only appears to be new as the West, with its far younger history, as well as its greater level of global visibility, is coping with and defining it within its own cultural understanding for the very first time (Meyerowitz 4).

It is to be understood, therefore, that transgenderism in the aforementioned Eastern cultures is very unlike that which is perceived of transgenderism in the United States; in a historical sense, it is much more than a revolutionary movement or physical change or contemporary issue. It is, in fact, a cultural practice and identity that, for the most part, has a deeper significance in regards to cultural and religious ideologies, attitudes, and rituals (Meyerowitz 7).

And this, according to anthropologist and author Professor Walter Williams, is where the greatest divide between the West and the East is most apparent: the idea of culture. In truth, cultures of the West are at a great disadvantage in comparison to those of the East as there is little chance of complete unification. In other words, the United States does not follow a singular culture or faith, as it is comprised of hundreds of different cultures and faiths and is founded upon the idea of diversity and religious freedom. In short, it is a nation that is without one universal set of traditions. In the East, on the other hand, most of the countries are of a single faith (primarily Islam), and therefore their peoples are more able to abide by a single set of beliefs and practices. As, as previously explained, these Eastern cultures are also much older than the history of the West, these beliefs and practices have been borne from centuries of more widely followed standardized understanding.

Granted, this is not to say that all of the countries of the North African/Arabian/Southwest-Asian region follow the same practices, even if the majority of them,

save for Israel, are of the Islamic faith. There, too, are slight differences in interpretation and views on transgenderism.

In Morocco, for instance - that is, a country that is located in the Northern part of Africa - Islam is still, in the Western frame of thought, very strict. So strict, in fact, that countries in the West, namely the United States, see their attitudes towards and of women as almost barbaric: medieval abuse and subjugation of the female sex and the rigidity of the gender roles are frowned upon in the United States. However, this Western imagination of North African Islam is not entirely correct, although, at first glance, certain reservations about the treatment of women, and gender as a whole, are somewhat understandable. But what goes misunderstood is the idea that, in Morocco, genders are not, for want of a better word, ranked, as it was in the early part of the West in the earlier half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, although the genders are not fluid, or equal, for that matter, they are considered by Moroccan Muslims as complementary (Amado 97).

The gender system in Morocco, then, is said to be constructed on fixed spaces: each gender therefore occupies one fixed space in society, the home, and the culture as a whole (and it is also in this sense that the gender division differs from that of the West). Moreover, because Islam is said to be deeply influenced by certain practices in Jewish culture, it comes as no surprise that patriarchy plays an important role in the creations of these fixed gender-oriented spaces. Fundamentally, in the patriarchal system, heavy emphasis is placed upon the idea of reproduction; or, in a less biological sense, in carrying the family line on through later centuries. Thus, in this type of progeny-oriented culture, homosexuality - or any deviation that does not allow for reproduction - is seen as negative. If it does not serve the continuation of the given society, then it has no place in said society: as same-sex relationships cannot, scientifically speaking, produce children, then it is considered unnatural and unacceptable within Islam society (Amado 99).

This ideology leaves no room for deviation, whether it be in terms of sexuality or in terms of gender identity. In short, those who identify as being transgendered do not fit into the gender binary that is encouraged and enforced in Islamic Moroccan society; in the end, although, technically, individuals may be able to pass as members of the opposite sex, they still lack the physiological ability to procreate (Shannahan 61).

Instead - to return to the aforementioned concept of fixed gender spaces - it is ideal that members of said Moroccan society strictly abide by the rigid and inflexible gender divide. As each gender has its own particular job, and as each particular job is intended to work in unison with other jobs so as to help maintain and improve Moroccan society, to question the gender binary, or to attempt to blur the clear and precise gender laws, would ultimately attempt to undo the good that is intended by said laws. In other words, the overall well-being of Islamic Moroccan society depends on the contributions of all of its citizens, and the expectations for each citizen is made explicit according to his or her gender.

Here, the gender roles to which individuals are assigned are not unlike those that once existed more openly in Western cultures (however, bear in mind that although the roles appear to be the same across cultures, the overall purposes of said roles are perceived differently: in the East, said roles are intended to be complementary; in the West, said roles were, and continue to be, seen as though in a hierarchy). Additionally, according to Shanahan, "...[said] roles result from societies definition of home: in Moroccan culture, the private sector, or home, is where family-oriented activities take place, and in these private sectors the primary focus of family is on societal cohesion" (64). In layman's terms, every member of the family has a specific role to

fill. For instance, women in Morocco predominantly occupy the space of the home, as their jobs are associated with family and education: it is the woman's job to care for and teach the children in the home, as well as ensure that the living space is organized and efficient. The men, on the other hand, primarily occupy the work-space, so as to provide for the family and ensure that the space that the women and children occupy is suitable to the family's needs. Ultimately, a singular family unit that is happy will better contribute to Moroccan society as a whole.

After all of this is said, however, to say that all cultures of Islamic faith are as rigid, gender-speaking, would be a terrible oversight; for, although Islam as a whole does not allow for much gender deviance, there are societies, namely that of Iran, where a certain level of alternative gender performance is imbedded in traditional rituals.

In continuing with the example of Iran - a country which is a country that is Islamic and resides in Southwest-Asia - cross-dressing practices are a normal part of society. The reason for this is in response to the strictness in gender binaries in Islamic culture: essentially, rather than simply dictate and adhere to gender rigidity and fixed spaces, citizens of Iran allow for an outlet of sexual frustration. As in most Islamic countries, sexuality is a taboo subject; moreover, female sexuality is often downplayed in comparison to that of males due to the patriarchal nature of Islamic faith and practice. And it is in this sense that Iran greatly differs from Morocco: it makes use of repressed sexuality and allows for satirization and gender performance as a means of release or expression. According to Azam Torab, author of *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*,

> ...satiric performances concerning female sexuality are particularly popular in women's social gatherings. There are many popular comic songs called generically 'of the streets and bazaars' (*kucheh bazari* i.e. popular), which women sing as they seductively dance and act (sometimes with costumes) in single-sex social gatherings, formerly particularly at weddings and following birth. Persian dance can be particularly coquettish (*ba naz*) teasing (*ba eshveh*) and flirtatious (*ba kereshmeh*) (217).

Here, Torab describes the most popular Iranian ritual that goes against typically Islamic beliefs, and which allows for a certain level of sexuality. Following this discussion, Torab also goes on to note how highly striking and sexual the performances are, and how women attempt to "[cast] themselves as sexual with dramatic comic expertise...as a resource to control and manipulate male desire" (217). To clarify, the author is implying that in their highly sexualized performances, women are ultimately playing to the patriarchal emphasis on male sexual desire, as said sexual desire drives Islamic civilization.

In fact, it is this openness to the expression of female sexuality that allows for a certain level of gender deviance. Really, because women are, in a way, going against those strict gender rule that help to govern Islamic society, some sort of patriarchal guideline must also be set in place in order to ensure that said discussion of taboo sexuality does not completely lose sight of the overarching aims of Islam. This is to say, in Iran the *kucheh bazari* ritual is not exclusive to women. Eventually, men, too, seized the opportunity to hyper-sexualize the female population by way of cross-dressing and performing the very same dances and routines as their female counterparts (Torab 218). In doing so, the men attempt to reiterate the patriarchal nature of Islamic practice in Iran. To put it in another way, men downplay the very confrontational nature of the sexualized female performance by putting it in a context which implies that said performance is not to be taken seriously: men take the ritual and transform it into a purely

comical affair, and female sexuality, though in some circles is seen as redefined, is placed in a more subjugated status. Says Torab, "it is to appropriate and contain the threat of de-masculinization that occurs when women take charge of their own sexuality" (218).

However, although elements of transgenderism, through cross-dressing, are utilized in the gender performance, it is not entirely done in an effort to transgress the gender binary. If anything, suggests Torab, cross-dressing helps to reinforce the strict gender roles that are outlined by the Islamic faith (219). This is due to the fact that in order for a man to successfully pass as a female, he must wholly adhere to and adopt attributes that are deemed exclusively feminine. Thus, in adopting said characteristics, and indicating that they are, in fact, solely of the feminine persuasion, the men who cross-dress and perform the *kucheh bazari* deter the efforts of the female sect of society that aims to destabilize the rigid gender lines and traditions that were outlined in the Islamic faith. In Iran, too, then, transgenderism, though slightly more visible and somewhat practiced, is primarily viewed as a form of entertainment, and is therefore still not accepted as a legitimate form of gender expression. The *kucheh bazari* actually manages to re-vitalize and reiterate the gender binary in Iran.

In a completely different turn of events, it seems, then, the Islamic culture in Arabia - specifically, Oman - takes on an almost entirely different attitude towards the transgendered identity and community. In fact, as anthropologist and author Unni Wikan discovered when studying transgenderism in the region of Arabia, the Islamic country of Oman incorporates a system of a gender triad. That is to say, instead of there only being two widely accepted and visible genders, Oman encourages the acceptance of a third, more ambiguous (non-specifically female and non-specifically male) gender. In doing so, the Islamic culture of Oman is not completely far off one of the most essential Islamic priorities: that which refers to a society in which all parts complement one another and work together for the betterment of the country as a whole.

In Oman tradition, then, each part of the gender triad - much like each half of the gender binary as found and enforced in both Morocco and Iran - both directly and indirectly one, or both, of the other parts (Wikan 306). Ultimately, there is a purely feminine aspect of the triad, as well as a strictly masculine aspect; also, much like the gender systems of Iran and Morocco, each specific gender has its place and role in society. However, what is different about the Oman interpretation and practice of Islamic gender conceptions comes in the form of the ever-mysterious third leg of the triad: the third leg, which Wikan describes as being one comprised of a relatively large population of transgendered male-to-females (306).

In Oman culture, gender is seen as something that is internal: its interpretation relies more on the individual's behavior rather than on physical anatomy. With this in mind, it is imperative to understand that gender classification in Oman occurs, not at birth - although, an initial gender observation is made, so as to more easily identify the individual's original gender identity in comparison to the gender identity they eventually go on to fulfill - but in early childhood and onward.

Children are then observed from an early age, and, according to which gender-specific behavior they exhibit, are categorized as such. For instance, should a young boy begin to demonstrate certain habits that are primarily associated with women, he is classified - and readily accepted - by Oman culture as a transgendered/transsexual female. From this classification, he/she is placed in all-woman social gatherings and is accepted, without question, as a member of the third leg of the gender triad.

From here, in terms of gender representation, the transsexual woman in Oman society is truly ambiguous, as he does not solely adopt those qualities of the traditional female. Instead, he borrows from both sides, and his manner of dress has elements of masculinity as well as of femininity (Wikan 308).

Once the transsexual child moves on to adolescence and adulthood - that is, those ages during which sexual activity is expected - he is identified as such for deeper reasons than those pertaining to his public behavior. In other words, he is continued to be seen as such because of the likelihood of his passive sexual roles, as true women take on such sexual roles. A transsexual, then, is regarded as a homosexual prostitute, as, although he is accepted as a transsexual female, he is still physically unable to fulfill one of the most essential roles of the Muslim female (that is, reproduction) (Wikan 308).

However, this is not to say that a transsexual male cannot change his classification. In fact, if a transsexual is able to assert his masculinity by deflowering a virgin bride, he will be accepted as an actual male. Moreover, if, later on, he so decides that he once again identifies more as a transsexual woman, he may cross the gender lines again and return to the status of a transsexual woman. Expressed in a different way, the lines that allegedly separate each leg of the Oman gender triad are thin and flexible: they are not rigid in the same way as those that are found in the Moroccan and Iranian gender binaries. Gender, in Oman, is most heavily dependent upon behavior and feelings than it is on physical anatomy.

What with the United States as the most visible nation, aided by other various countries and diverse, meda-driven cultures of the West, it is often difficult to conceive of different opinions and practices regarding a number of different concepts. If anything, one often makes the mistake of associating Western thought with being the only thought - or, at least, the most significant thought. But in attempting to understand the world and the very, ever-essential ideas and communities and identities that exist, it is imperative that one makes the anthropological effort to examine those cultures that normally go unnoticed, or exist in much smaller, albeit richer, significance. This notion reigns when studying those issues that pertain to transgenderism.

It is accurate to say, in fact, that the United States is arguably one of the more modernized nations in the world, as well as one of the most highly popularized countries in the world, through monopolized film and television influences; however, the United States, and the Western hemisphere as a whole, do not bear as rich and as deep a history, in general, as those cultures that are found in the East. Indeed, such regions as North Africa, Arabia, and Southwest Asia are all of more deeply imbedded and traditional and historically meaningful pasts. The overall religions and, on a more specific level, the religious practices in the cultures that are found in these regions, are extensively different from those that are found in the geographically expansive and technologically and economically advanced West. The cultures of the East rely more on traditions that have existed for many centuries that stretch back before the times in which the United States found its power, and was eventually backed by its fellow Western neighbors. And it is in this way that their attitudes concerning transgenderism differ: ideas of gender deviance that are imbedded deep within each specific Eastern culture's traditions and bear a different kind of meaning than that in the West. In summation, then, in order to better understand the varying attitudes and practices towards transgender issues, one must explore beyond the boundaries that are drawn and more heavily publicized by the West.

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