

LOVE AND POLITICS

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Women living under muslim laws

النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين

Femmes sous lois musulmanes

Transnational Feminist Solidarity Network

About Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is a feminist international solidarity network with a mission to effectively advance women's equality, gender justice, and women's human rights through a variety of channels; providing information, research and analysis, training workshops and conferences, as well as facilitating a transnational and intergenerational collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. Our mission includes strengthening women's individual and collective struggles for equality and their human rights, especially in Muslim contexts. We achieve this by breaking isolation and by creating and reinforcing spaces for women to share experiences and lend support to one another. In this way WLUML promotes the creation and strengthening of both local and transnational women's movements. The network started in 1984 by nine women from Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Pakistan who came together in support of local women's struggles.

What is in the Name? Our name challenges the myth of one, homogenous 'Muslim world'. This deliberately created myth fails to reflect that laws said to be Muslim vary from one context to another. Many different laws simultaneously govern us: laws recognised by the state (codified and uncoded) and informal laws such as customary practices, which vary according to the cultural, social and political context.

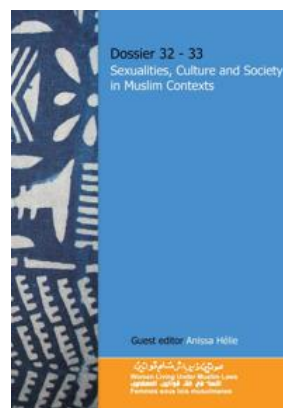
Bodily Autonomy, Integrity, and Sexual Rights Programme was launched as a means of widening the debate about women's bodily autonomy and sexuality, a major area of the WLUML concerns from its inception. WLUML's research and documentations have made it amply clear that a woman's body is the site of many social, cultural, religious, legal, and political struggles. In the name of religion – be it Islam, Christianity or other religious beliefs – or in the name of cultural purity and tradition, women have been subjected to discriminatory practices, codes of conduct and laws with the ultimate goal of controlling their sexuality and excluding them from public life. These practices and laws constitute and reinforce insidious forms of violence against women. The goal of this programme has been to develop new tools of analysis by exploring and mapping new avenues, and sharing strategies initiated in different communities by women activists to claim their rights and exercise control over their bodies as well as their minds. It examines the various means by which women resist and subvert their marginalisation from public life and public spaces.

Previous Publications under WLUML's 'Bodily Autonomy, Integrity, and Sexual Rights'

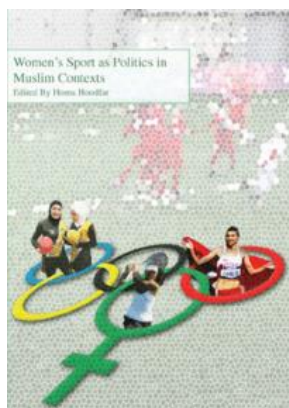
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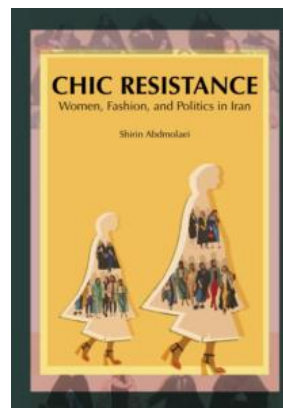
["Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restriction and Resistance"](#)
[Edited by Anissa Helie and Homa Hoodfar \(2012\)](#)



["Sexuality, Culture and Society in Muslim Contexts"](#)
[\(Dossier 32-33\) Edited by Anissa Helie \(2014\)](#)



["Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts"](#)
[Edited by Homa Hoodfar \(2015\)](#)



["Chic Resistance: Women, Fashion and Politics in Iran"](#)
[by Shirin Abdmolaei \(2019\)](#)

About the Author



Kalin Pak is a philosophy graduate student from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Her research focuses on the metaphysical implications of neo-liberal and post-structural feminist theories of gender, and the implications they have on global social and political practice. During 2020, she was a research fellow for the publications division of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). While originally born in the United States, she spent most of her upbringing in the Middle East (U.A.E., Oman, and Kuwait) after her parents relocated there for work. Drawing on her experience of gendered dynamics in the Middle East, Kalin's primary motivation is to ensure that the feminist advances made in the West are won not at the expense of, but in conjunction with women in the (Middle) East.

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Abstract

Although love is often characterized as a fundamental aspect of human life, it remains underrepresented in political discourse. This article is an attempt to initiate this very discourse by examining the ways politics is intimately connected to the phenomenology of romantic love, and specifically the way this political phenomenology is realized within Muslim contexts. While love is an elusive emotion that has yet to be uniformly defined, there are definitive ways in which a political environment determines *how* and *to what extent* a culture of love may be manifested and maintained. This work identifies three ways love is politically pre-conditioned, namely, through the way our autonomy, actions, and values are politically influenced, and examines the results of these romantic dynamics within various Muslim societies. The upshot of this article is to provide the conceptual tools to frame love as a political right, and one that we must start advocating for.

Introduction

When discussing love, it is difficult to say anything about it that has not already been said by some 80s pop song or Shakespearian sonnet. Love is talked about all the time. It is what Solomon (2007: 51) calls a “hypercognized” emotion. In the Western world, one is bombarded with this concept almost everywhere. We are told things like “love gives life meaning” and “love transcends all boundaries”. We rejoice when we are in love. We lament when we lose love. And we pine when we are in search of love. We talk about how difficult love can be, or how so and so recently left one love for another. We take courses and listen to seminars on how to love better, or on how to be more successful at attracting more. One wonders if any other concept takes up as much mental time and energy as romantic love.

You will notice that I contextualised my description of love specifically to the West. Why is this so? Growing up in the West, the personification of love is so pervasive that the question of the right to love was never one I thought to ask. I took love to be something ubiquitous. Perhaps we might differ in how we love, or whom we love, or how well we love, but our *access* to love was something I took to be a natural given. It was not until my parents moved our family from the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia to the golden waves of the Middle Eastern desert that I realised what I had been taking for granted. Contra to its clichéd characterisation that it transcends all, has the power to stop wars, and is all we need to solve our global disputes, love is not politically neutral. The right to love freely, the right to choose whom one loves, and the right to express that love is not universal. With such a vague understanding of what love is, there comes even more ambiguity with what love presupposes. Perhaps

the right to love requires a certain degree of social and economic autonomy for women, sexual openness, and progressive education. Or even more fundamentally, perhaps the right to love requires a consensus that love is something of positive virtue in itself, one that should be collectively valued and protected. Whatever the concept presupposes, it seems that the ability to love is closely tied with how love is positioned in relation to the values a given culture has already established within its political milieu. As David Schmitt (2006: 261) writes, “[love] must, to some degree, be a socially constructed experience and reflect the time and place within which it occurs”. This means that in analysing how the right to love is presented in each culture, we are also examining the history and development of that culture, the social practices that uphold its structure, and the collective means which transform the culture into a political entity.

In this paper, I will attempt to tackle this question of what love means and, in particular, what love means in regions under Muslim laws, where the politics of love is especially precarious. While there is no doubt that the politics of love is far more extensive and nuanced than I have time for here, I will limit my discussion to three concepts that I believe are prerequisites for a healthy manifestation of love: autonomy, action, and value. In discussing each, I will consider three questions: (i) to what extent is each concept necessary for the healthy instantiation of love?; (ii) how does this instantiation become politically dependent through these concepts?; (iii) and how is this political dynamic manifested within Muslim contexts? It should be noted that my aim is not to provide a definitive definition of what love is, nor a perfect equation for how it should be understood. Rather, my aim is to provide a descriptive account of how the meaning of love is typically understood in regions that function within cultures and values that are said to be derived from Islam, and a systematic account of how these laws and political structures interact with these meanings. In doing so I hope to demonstrate how the ability to love should not only be understood as a personal choice, but also a political right. Because the right to love is entangled in structures of social control, it is often at odds with our ideas of autonomy and freedom of choice. In order to navigate through these complexities we must begin both a discussion of and a demand for our right to love.

1. Personal Politics

Despite the endless discourse one can find on love, very little of it reveals anything insightful about what love actually is. While few phenomena share the same degree of ubiquity as love, few phenomena are as difficult to capture. It is perhaps this paradoxical nature that explains why academics have seemed to shy away from substantial analysis of the emotion, preferring to leave love to the realm of the musicians and poets. Indeed, as Edward Vacek (1982: 156) suggests, most academic writings on the topic that do exist will speak about love with the assumption that its meaning is already

evident. Likewise, Jules Toner (1968: 16) notes that questions tackling the nature of love are often met with the despair that it can never be answered. It seems there is something utterly obtuse, yet utterly obvious about the concept. Love is a given that no one ever quite receives.

Love is not only a mystery for academics. International law has struggled to formulate a clear position regarding the right to love. In only one of the core international human rights treaties, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, is love, albeit underwhelmingly, explicitly mentioned: “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in an environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”. This is in contrast to the right to marriage, which is clearly stated in the *Universal Declaration of Human rights*: “Men and women of full age, without any limitations due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.” The protection of the right to marriage can likewise be found in the *International Convention on Civil and Political Rights*; *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*; *International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers*; *American Convention on Human Rights*; *International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*; *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*; *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*; and *European Convention of Human Rights*. It seems we can recognise the right to an intimate relationship between two persons with little difficulty only when it is accounted for within the legally binding framework of marriage. Love, on the other hand, is more difficult to capture in objective terms. Although intuitively we would assume that love is the thing being protected by these marriage rights, we appear to lack the vocabulary or conceptual framework to defend love on its own terms.

Perhaps one reason love remains politically underrepresented is because, as an emotion, it is generally believed to belong exclusively to the realm of the personal rather than the political. Where the personal refers to an individual with an individual subjective experience, the political refers to the aggregate of complex relations shared between multiple individuals, which organize these individuals into a collective community. In this case, the emotional experience of love is typically understood as something bound up with the private subjectivity of the individual. This is why we are commonly confronted with lines such as “we all love differently” or “we all have our special someone”. We assume that love and the emotional experience of love is specifically unique to each person, and that this experience is something independent from our collective existence.

Unfortunately, this reading that the personal and political spheres remain two distinct and independent entities is too simplistic for their realities. Let us recall the famous slogan from feminism’s second wave: “the personal is political”. What this slogan taught us was that the matters of politics were never exclusively about public issues. The private matters of women, marriage, and family have always been subjected to state intervention. The idea that the private realm of the family was

detached from the social, political, and economic injustices of the public world was supplanted with the acknowledgement that it was instead the very reflection and reinforcement of all the inequalities between the sexes. Politics was no longer left on the doorstep. The ways in which intimate family dynamics perpetuated the oppressive patriarchal order was brought under scrutiny. In the name of total female emancipation, the personal was joined at the hip with the politics and solidified by law.

In the same way that the militant feminists of the 1960s and 1970s identified how oppressive political power infiltrated and sustained personal life, I want to suggest that love is intimately connected with the politics of the time and place it is manifested in. If this is so, then it means that the experience of love goes beyond simply the private experience of the individual. In being a political entity, love becomes a political act. This act can either be accepted or rejected as a right available to us. However, in order to insist on the right to love we must first understand how love is politically dependent.

2. Love and Autonomy

The first way love is intertwined with politics is through its connection with the autonomy of individuals. Often the discourse on the relation between love and autonomy is centred on how one loses one's autonomy when in love (Lehrer 1997). For example, when Jack loves Mary, he feels like he has lost control over himself, that he is a slave to his passion. While I think this aspect is true, I want to suggest that before we can talk about the *loss* of autonomy in love, we must first appreciate how the *cultivation* of love is dependent on the recognition of the autonomy and individuation of our beloved. This recognition, I believe, is deeply political.

Contra to the thesis of this paper, German philosopher Hannah Arendt believed that love is radically anti-political. This is because love has the power to reveal to us the "who" in both ourselves and in our beloved. For example, Jack may love Mary even though she is not a sports fan, or comes from a different cultural background, or is an executive at a company he finds ethically dubious. This demarcation between *who* someone is and *what* that person is reveals that within a legitimate instance of love, two subjects mutually recognise the individuation, and in turn, the autonomous nature of the other. Jack can acknowledge all the external, constitutive features bound up with Mary's existence, the "what" she is, but he can separate these from the internal subjectivity of "who" Mary really is. Arendt (1998: 242) holds that the rejection of the "what" for the "who" cannot be a politically viable force, and indeed, is perhaps "the most powerful of all antipolitical forces". However, while I agree that the purest forms of love will be about the "who", namely the distinct and individual subjectivity of the person, I contend with the idea that this recognition of an autonomous agent is able to manifest itself outside the realm of political activity.

The reality of love is a democratic enterprise. It requires settling disputes, compromises, and sacrifice. Each must be done mutually and willingly, where power is equally shared and where the two selves are recognised and respected by the other. French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir cautioned that often problematic dynamics of romantic love can be traced back to an attempt to idealize, submit to, merge with, possess or justify oneself in their beloved (Cleary 2015:161). Such relationships are characterized by the lack of a reciprocal recognition of the freedoms of the two individuals, a lack which breeds resentment and disappointment. This sentiment is resonated in De Munck and Koraotayey's (1999: 273) global cultural study that found societies where men and women are valued equally are more likely to hold romantic love as an important basis for marriage. The study concluded that:

- (a) Where premarital sex and/or adultery are permitted for only one sex (in this sample, males), a condition of sexual inequality exists, and therefore romantic love is rated of low importance as a basis for marriage,
- (b) Societies in which premarital sex/and or adultery are prohibited for both sexes (a condition of sexual equality) rate romantic love higher than societies in which sexual inequality exists.

I shall return to the relation between love and sex in a moment. What is important to note for now is that we have both a theoretical and empirical basis for asserting that a reciprocal respect for the autonomy of the other is a necessary component for a healthy instantiation of love. This means that both parties must be able to recognise the "who" in the other, namely, their autonomous subjectivity. In heterosexual relationships, therefore, the man and woman must be recognised by each other as equal.

The political implication is whether or not this recognition occurs. Across cultures, the marriageability (or loveability) of a woman is often predicated on *what* she is, namely a woman, not *who* she is, an individual with her own subjective worldview. In virtue of her sex, she is gendered into a socially subordinate position to her male counterpart. Her perceived societal status may either be internalized and accepted or entirely rejected by her own subjective experience of herself. However, because she is still perceived by the external world as a "what", this subjectivity remains irrelevant regarding how the world, as well as the individuals in it, relate to her. In such a social positioning, it is questionable whether a genuine recognition of mutual autonomy is possible. Not only must both the woman and the man somehow transcend themselves from their gendered and hierarchical conditioning, but they must also both be aware that the other may assert their autonomy at any time

and have the freedom to walk away. When we consider all the material inequalities that are implicated in a couple's split, such as differences in financial security, childcare responsibilities, and even social stigma, such a scenario seems almost utopian and certainly questionable in its political attainability.

Such is the reality for women globally. And yet, for many women in Muslim contexts the question of autonomy is an even steeper mountain to climb. It is not just that their assertions of "who" they are become stifled, but often these women find themselves without the spaces and opportunities to get to make these assertions in the first place. It is a dominant belief that within the majority of Arab Muslim households, families are aligned within sharply pronounced gendered roles. In this picture, men are positioned in roles of authority, while women are assigned the role of mother and caretaker who must adhere to their respective male authority. These gendered and hierarchical roles are not restricted to the private sphere of the household; rather, gendered dynamics of dependency and subordination are marked in all areas of social, political, and economic life. It must be noted here that I do not endorse the pervasive generalization that *all* Muslim households share a homogenous and inherently sexist way of living. Not only does this generalization fail to take into account the diversity within different Muslim cultures, but it also perpetuates harmful Western stereotypes that are inadequately informed. What I want to suggest is not that there is a single form or model of gender that all individual Muslims abide by, but that this stereotype is supported by the legal and political frameworks of many countries that make (albeit false) claims about working in the interest of Islam.

Let me draw on an example from my own experience. After my family relocated to the Middle East, I spent a significant portion of my life raised in Kuwait. Kuwait currently ranks third highest for gender equality in the MENA region (behind Israel and the United Arab Emirates).¹ Globally, however, Kuwait still ranks 122 out of 153 on the same index and is, thus, far from the female utopia described in my analysis of mutually recognised autonomy. Here, the space for an equal exchange between men and women, a space where power imbalances are absent and where the authentic selves of both parties can be laid bare, is inaccessible within the current political climate.

The imbalances of rights and power between the sexes are made even more explicit by their solidification in law. For instance, under Kuwaiti law women are unable to enter into a marriage without the permission of her male guardian (*wali*), nor are they permitted the right to marry non-Muslim men. Polygamy, while not a common practice, remains a sanctioned legal right and permits men to take up to four wives, while the wives themselves are not given a say. In cases where the marriage is deemed unbearable for either party, divorce is a legal option and is becoming more and more common. However, the woman may only file for divorce under specific circumstances (*fasokh*), whereas the man can file for divorce out of arbitrary will (*tulaq*). Should a divorced woman decide to

¹ This data is taken from the World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report" of 2020.

remarry or if she is divorced on grounds of suspected adultery, she automatically loses custody over her children. No such legal verdict exists in cases where the man is guilty of the same infidelity. Even when it comes to the persecution of rape, neither marital rape, nor the women's lack of consent is accounted for in Kuwait's criminal code.²

I list these examples because together they propagate a system of female subordination, where the exclusion of women from an equal membership in society is set in stone by their legal structures. It should also be noted that these disparities are perpetuated in a time when more and more families are dependent on female incomes (Europarl 2014:22). And yet, the stereotype that the duty of a woman belongs first and foremost in the domestic sphere remains the dominant belief in general society. This ideal of the woman as the devoted wife and mother is pervasive. It is perpetuated by various forms of indoctrination, ranging from blown up billboard images of smiling mothers serving their husbands and children dinner, to household management classes taught exclusively to girls in primary and secondary schools. And of course, this image is made even more concrete by the husband's legal right to forbid his wife from working outside the home should he believe that her work negatively affects her "family interests".³

These instances of inequality between the roles and rights of men and women show that a man's domination over his female counterpart is systematic, as it is actively protected through his legal and political privileges. Women are thus faced with the legal, financial, social, and even physical pressure to remain within their gendered class of second-class citizen. As a woman her entire legal representation amounts to the protection of only "what" she is, a mother and a wife. Hidden behind Kuwait's claim to gender parity is the glaring truth that, unlike men, women are unable to transcend the "who" they are, from the "what" they are. The material and social constraints women face, and the social handicap that these constraints incur, are such that the internal and subjective world of individual women are made inconsequential by the gendered position they must uphold.

What does this mean for love? It means that, within the intimate relationships between husband and wife, there lacks a political foundation for women to assert an equal footing to their male partner. Within the legal framework of Kuwait, as well as in several other Muslim countries, women are set up to remain in a constant state of male dependency, be it to their father, their husband, their brother(s), or son(s). As long as the woman's position is politically maintained within this unequal distribution of

² This is in reference to law no. 16 of Kuwait's (1960) penal code.

³ Taken from art. 89 of the Personal Status Law of Kuwait. See <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/KW.pdf>

power, she is denied the possibility for equal exchange. And without this equal exchange the process of the recognising *who* their partner really is remains increasingly difficult.

Hannah Arendt (1998: 242) argues that love reveals the depth of our partner's subjectivity because "it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be." She stipulates that love is anti-political because it is intended towards a subject and not an object. But perhaps Arendt is too quick to take for granted the political preconditions that go into the ability to distinguish women as subjects. In order for women to be acknowledged as thinking and feeling individuals, with their own ideas, aspirations, and desires, women must stand in a relation outside of a state of social inferiority. They must have the right to express their autonomy and be free to make personal choices that reflect who they are as individuals. I agree with Arendt that love is about the subject of a person, and that personal autonomy is necessary for the recognition of this subjectivity. However, if love is about free individuals then the phenomenology of love has a liberal bias, and the way this bias is facilitated or resisted in a cultural milieu is a political issue.

To be sure, this picture I have drawn does not completely align with every experience of love, and indeed I do not by any means want to suggest that any couples that are set up within dynamics of unequal distributions of power do not know what it is to love. Love is love, after all, and I can think of countless examples of couples who have cultivated a happy and healthy love for their partners, despite whatever power dynamic their cultural milieu propagates. My point, rather, is that if we want to pursue a right to love, we must know what it entails. The recognition of autonomy is bound up with the phenomenology of love, and to demand a right to love is to also demand a willingness to bring forth a political environment where the liberty of women is not only acknowledged but encouraged. Indeed, much of the question of what it means to facilitate a right to love is answered through an examination of what it means to facilitate women's right to personal autonomy.

3. Love and Action

A second way love is bound up with politics is through the way love is actualised. Often when we think about love, we think about it in terms of how it is expressed. Love on its own is an abstract and intangible concept, and so the reference to concrete acts of love is often the only way we can qualify its existence. As Karandashev (2017: 22) notes, love has a long history of being something understood through demonstration: "[as] people in early historical cultures believed, true love is expressed in actions, in doing something good for a beloved." Medieval knights "demonstrated" their love through daring deeds and service for their ladies. Poets documented and dedicated romantic odes and ballads to their muses. We are taught that when we love someone, we must show them. Love left unexpressed is love left unattained.

Granted, it is a relatively uncontroversial claim that the act of love is a fundamental aspect to the experience of the emotion. However, what I want to suggest is that the act of love is *necessary* for both the initial manifestation of love as well as its preservation. Integral to the structure of the emotion of love is a desire and a drive to satisfy this desire.⁴ When we love someone, we want to *do* something for them, not only because we care for them, but because by expressing our love in a physical and tangible capacity, we are bringing it forth into the world. In other words, by acting out our love, we are giving it a new and more robust ontological weight.

Perhaps the clearest way I can demonstrate this point is through a comparison between being in love and having a crush. An adolescent boy can (and very often will) have a crush on a famous and beautiful actress he sees on TV. He is attracted to her beauty, he finds her charming in her interviews, and he imagines the things he would say to impress her should they ever be in close enough proximity for her to know he exists. His crush does produce a desire, but I think we would be hesitant to say he is in love with her. Indeed, we might even have concerns about the boy's mental wellbeing if he insisted that he was. What is it then that differentiates an innocent celebrity crush from being in love?

We consider a crush to be a shallower emotional state than love. I believe there are two ways (at least) to account for this shallowness. First, there is an assumption that the agent lacks a solid foundation for his feelings. We do not associate any particular significance to the boy's celebrity crush because we know that he has had no real interaction with her that would have given him the opportunity to really get to know "who" this woman is. As we saw in the previous section, this understanding of the "who" is essential for the development of love. The second reason we might underestimate the seriousness of a crush is because it lacks a result. Implicit in the idea of a crush is the acknowledgement that the agent's feelings have not been actualized. For a crush to grow into love it requires further acts to bring it to fruition. For instance, my own father's schoolboy crush on my mother, his then college study partner, acquired a stronger and more serious status only after his feelings led him to pursue further action. Things like the mustering of the nerve to finally ask her out on a date, spending time alone with her, getting to know her family history and upbringing, the long-distance commutes between their respective grad-schools, and the tireless efforts to win her (rather unimpressed) parents' approval, were all examples of the actualisation of his feelings for her. Had my father simply had a desire without the drive to put this desire into action, it is unlikely I would be here today.

⁴ This idea of a dual structure of a desire and a drive is central to many theories of rationality within philosophy of emotions. See de Sousa (1998); Greenspan (1980,1981); Gustafson (1989); Mulligan (1998); Nussbaum (2001); Price (2015); Solomon (1980) for detailed discussions on the internal structure of emotions.

Action is thus a necessary condition for the development of love. However, the ways in which these actions are facilitated or repressed is a political issue. In a collective society, actions fall under the jurisdiction of political control. The question of *who* can act, *how* they can act, and *what* actions are at stake, are all determined by external jurisprudence. Currently, gay marriage is legal in only 31 countries. The condemnation or acceptance of gay rights does not only refer to the act of same-sex marriage, but also the condemnation or acceptance of all acts pertaining to love that goes against heteronormative practices. While this is not to say that gay or lesbian couples in Poland, Egypt, Mozambique, or any other country where same-sex marriage is illegal do not know what it is to love each other, it is to say that the actualisation of their love is greatly hindered by their inability to perform it publicly in the ways that are available to others.

How then are the actions of love permitted or suppressed within the different regions influenced by laws made in the purported name of Islamic values? Do the behaviours associated with love pose a threat to these values? And how are these behaviours resisted? To answer these questions, we must now turn to what is perhaps the most controversial yet inescapable aspect to any analysis of love, namely, sex. In her book *Sex and the Citadel*, Shareen el Feki wonderfully compares the attitudes of Egyptian Muslims toward sex with attitudes toward football: “Everyone talks about football, but hardly anyone plays it. But sex – everyone is doing it, but nobody wants to talk about it” (2013: 37-38). In many Muslim societies sex is one of, if not the, greatest social taboo. For el Feki, she sees the biggest divide between the West and Muslim majority countries to be rooted not in their values of democracy, but in sexuality (2013: 41).

But sex is not only a social stigma. It is something that is deliberately removed from society’s peripheral vision. Sex education is banned in schools. The films screened at the cinemas are censored for kissing scenes or brief nudity. Long-sleeves are photoshopped onto advertisements of Victoria Secret models. Explicit artwork or photographs are removed or covered up (I recall a specific instance from my Kuwaiti high school where a classmate and I stayed after school to help our history teacher go through our textbooks on the Vietnam War to black out any images of girls with an “indecent” amount of body exposed). And yet, the bitter irony is of course that in attempting to remove sex so entirely from our conceptual worldview, only more attention is drawn to it as a result.

The obsession with hiding sex has a long history in Islamic analysis. Fatema Mernissi (1975) and Fatna Aït Sabbah (1982) root this obsession in man’s insecurity of his own sexual inadequacy. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1985: 214) suggests that the rhetoric and practice of erotic passion increases the risk of reducing women to an object of male pleasure: “By confining women to pleasure, one turns her into a plaything, a doll. By doing so one limits love to the ludic and one reduces the wife to the rank of woman-object”. In other words, the idea is that women are denied the right to sexual pleasure

in order to protect her subjectivity. This reasoning screams of hypocrisy and works to trap women into yet another state of male dependency. The effective result is that sex becomes something confined solely to the married bedroom. For women, pre-marital sexual relations are categorically forbidden, as they open avenues of sexual satisfaction beyond that of her husband, thus breaking her sexual dependence on him. Some Muslim scholars have suggested that the attempt to curb sexual activity is the reason why men and women are separated in both public and private spaces.⁵ From schools, to parks, to your local McDonald's, designated "women only" spaces restrict the opportunity for men and women to share close proximity, and controls the possibility for "promiscuous" behavior.

But what exactly does this mean for love? Does the inability to have sex mean that unmarried couples are categorically unable to formulate any romantic attachment between them? Is sex the only kind of behavior that can bring love into actuality? Surely not. The extent to which sex is necessary for a romantic bond between two people depends on the individuals' needs and desires, as well as the ways these needs and desires integrate into their sets of beliefs and values. The issue is not that love depends on sex, nor that sex is the only way for love to be actualized. Rather, it is that love requires the space for interaction between two individuals. In the public attempt to curb what is deemed as immoral sexual behavior, the opportunity for this private space is lost. For many women living under Muslim laws, the possibility to interact freely and openly with the person of their choice is simply not an option available to them within their political and social climate. Dating is not only socially stigmatized but is also often punishable by law. In the United Arab Emirates, which is typically considered to be one of the most liberal Islamic countries, public displays of affection such as kissing, hugging or holding hands runs the risk of jail time. In Kuwait, it is routine for police to stop taxis to check that unmarried couples are not riding alone together. An Omani neighbor of mine once explained to my mother that Muslim girls do not date because love is only for marriage. The attitudes here seem to imply that one cannot partake in love without it corresponding with sex.

The problem here is that due to the "tainted" association love has with sex, all other acts of love become tainted by default. Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate the problems with this reasoning is if we transpose it into a simple syllogism:

All love leads to premarital sex.

All premarital sex is immoral.

Therefore, all love is immoral.

Of course, it does not take a logician to understand where this argument goes wrong. Even if we allow the second premise that all premarital sex is immoral (a premise I personally believe to be tendentious at best), on what grounds do we have to assert that love *necessarily* leads to sex? Even if it is less

⁵ See Karandashev (2017), p. 175-184 for an overview of these scholars.

common now than it was previously, couples all over the world, both secular and religious, opt to defer sex until after marriage, (my own parents included). And yet, in the name of moral sanctity (though I presume more in the interest in maintaining control over women's sexuality), the behaviors of love are identified as destructive and are banned from society. This means that, even for couples who have no interest in engaging in sexual relations, are deprived of the right to interact openly with the opposite sex. And with this absence comes the inability to find their own ways of actualizing their love.

Another issue for many young Muslims is that they simply do not know *how* to love. As I mentioned earlier, love is a diplomatic enterprise; it requires sacrifice, compromise, empathy, sensitivity, and a balance between selfishness and selflessness. It requires getting to know how to behave in an intimate relationship and understanding what it means to share one's life with another. Navigating through the reality of love is a skill that is far afield from the idealized image of the passionate utopia often marketed to us in movies. But without a proper education of what love is and what it entails, we have no reason not to accept these impracticable ideals at face value. We are left to internalize images and ideals and are left unaware of how these romanticized fictions translate into the everyday world. For some, this might mean that they place too much emphasis on their physical attraction to their partner, not realizing that emotional and intellectual compatibility is also necessary for sustaining a long-term romantic attachment. Or it could mean not knowing how to deal with many of the newfound insecurities and anxieties that may arise within an intimate relationship, such as jealousy, feelings of inferiority, fear of commitment, or difficulties with honesty and communication. Though rarely discussed, the fact is that the ability to sustain love in a healthy and intimate manner is something one *learns* how to do. Just as driving a car, writing a college application, or doing well at a job interview requires practice and experience to grow comfortable with all the delicate nuances that go into them, so too does the act of love require practice and experience to grasp the multiplicity of love's complexities. In order to love better, individuals require the space and opportunity to learn how.

I have argued that practicing love goes hand in hand with the actualisation of love. Unlike crushes, love must be realizable. It is the potential for actualisation based on deep personal interaction that constitutes the intensity characteristic to love and distinguishes it from a crush. However, the acceptability of this interaction is subjected to the regulations of social and political forces. The result is that not only is the practice of love determined by external forces, but the ability to love *well* remains within the regulation of politics.

4. Love and Value

So far, I have argued that love is a political entity determined by the facilitation or suppression, by our political landscape, of our autonomy and ability to act. I will now consider a third, and perhaps

most important way politics influences the way we love. That is, that our political milieu dictates the very way we come to understand what love is and how we should value it in our society. By this I mean that our concepts, our outlooks, and our practical orientation in the world are all engineered by the various ways we have been socialised.

The idea of conceptual engineering is rooted in the notion that personal subjectivity is deeply dependent on our collective, political and cultural engagement. As J. M. Balkin (1998: 18) writes, “[people] become people only when they enter into culture, which is to say, only when culture enters into them, and becomes them, when they are programmed with and hence constituted by tools of understanding created by a culture at a certain point in history.” The way we form an understanding of a thing, and the kind of meaning and significance a thing holds with us is, to a great extent, determined by the relation shared between ourselves and our community. If something relates to me as a negative occurrence in my environment, I will associate a negative value to that thing. In a society where I am taught to value the principles of private liberty and a free-market economy, socialist theories would most likely be met with hostility, as these clash with my preconceived notions of what is valuable and should be incorporated into my life. These associations can, and do, play into the political identity of their context. Oftentimes, our concepts are constructed in the ways they are in order to facilitate a specific political agenda. In most cases, this agenda is the reinforcement of the principles that constitute its political identity.

In the case of love, the connotations it carries and the associations we make with it will differ from culture to culture. For example, Shaver et al. (1991) studied emotional experiences of young people in America, Italy, and the People’s Republic of China and found that Americans and Italians are most likely to associate love with happiness, whereas in China love was more likely to carry connotations of sadness, wistfulness, and nostalgia. For instance, in the United States, where the political identity is very much predicated on the idealisation of individualism and freedom, love is beheld as a positive virtue precisely because it works to solidify and amplify these political virtues.

I will note here that this American conception of love is not unproblematic. The glorification of a hyper-idealised version of love, as often depicted in Hollywood films and teen romance novels, has propagated expectations of love that wildly contradict its reality. Ironically, in cultures with higher values of romantic love, individuals often find themselves more dissatisfied with their intimate relationships (Karandashev 2017: 18). While the ideal of romantic love is alluring, ecstatic, and indeed even addicting, it is also fragile, volatile, and often results in disappointment and conflict. Nevertheless, we value concepts according to how useful or coherent they are for our practical way of life. For a culture such as in the United States, where individualism is highly praised, love is often equated as a necessity for happiness. The almost imperative-like status love is given is not surprising

within a culture where individualism is so fundamental for its political identity. Concepts are set up to maintain power and social structure. While the content of a concept itself may vary, the model used for its social cognition remains the same. In Muslim contexts, the content love holds may carry different connotations, but the result remains that this content is used to maintain power within its political structure.

But what then is the content of love in a purported Muslim context? What meaning does the concept of love carry within various Muslim sensibilities? And how is this content used to maintain a cohesive political identity? Love is often characterized as a “Western” concept. This is hardly surprising considering how love plays into the fundamental principles of Western liberalism in the ways I have just described. However, these principles do not always translate into Muslim cultures where kinship and familial obligation takes priority over personal liberty. Because kinship networks are interwoven with social status and stratification, romantic relationships are often overlooked by the family’s investment in a strategic mate selection. As Halim Barakat (1993: 107) notes, “private property through inheritance, socialization, and the achievement of other goals transcend the happiness of the individual to guarantee communal interests”. Here, the object of value corresponds with the wellbeing of the family, rather than the individual. This means that the importance of the compatibility of religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds will often outweigh the value of the personal desire and individual choice characterised by love. Walter Armbrust (2009) highlights that in Egyptian cinema love is depicted as a point of tension within the protagonist who is often put in a position where he must choose between his own choice of a partner made in his own best interest, and an arranged partner made for him in the best interest of him as a member of his family. The narrative of love is presented as a point of contrast between the foreign and the local. Within its portrayal, the practice of love comes to represent the assimilation of a Western idea that conflicts and upsets traditional Islamic practices of courtship and the formation of marriage.

But the connotation of love as a “Western” concept has even more pressing implications when put into the context of our current geopolitical climate. For decades, the conflict within the Middle East involving the United States has solidified an ideological rivalry between the two regions. To embrace a “Westernized” way of life is not simply just an assimilation of two cultures that do not perfectly align. Rather, it is seen as a betrayal of the struggle and alienation many Muslims face as a direct result of America’s foreign policy. For many political institutions in the Middle East, this antagonism with the West, and especially the United States, has come to represent a significant part of their political identity. As a result, love itself becomes characterised as a threat to Muslim identities. Love comes to represent American cultural imperialism: it signifies a system of liberalism that violates the patriarchal hierarchy of many traditional Muslim societies; it carries the subtext of sexual promiscuity, irrational

behaviour and public indecency; it demands a reorientation of the attitudes and beliefs about women's rights and a recognition of their personal desires. When interpreted in this way, it is little wonder that many Islamic political institutions have tried to ban love from their social vocabulary. A clear example is the criminalisation of the celebration of Valentine's Day in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pakistan, in the name of its violation of "Islamic culture" (Srivastava, 2017).

But does love inherently violate Islamic cultures?⁶ Is it really so impossible for someone to simultaneously identify as Muslim and be in love? Surely, I am not alone in answering no. While the established custom of family-facilitated "romantic" partners remains the normative practice, there has emerged a definitive generational gap regarding the attitudes toward love. Throughout regions under Muslim law, love is becoming more and more important for young adults (Barakat, 1993; El-Haddad, 2003). Studies show that more individuals prefer their marriages to be a love match rather than a family arrangement, indicating a growing value placed on love as a distinct virtue (Friedland et al., 2016). Dating apps are becoming a popular way for young adults to pursue their romantic interests within their political restrictions. New vocabulary such as "halal dating" is being introduced to make sense of what it means to pursue a romantic interest whilst abiding by their religious laws (Nafhesa et al., 2020; Husain, 2020). The popularity of halal dating is being compounded by its representation in recent novels and media targeted for young adult Muslims (Newns 2019; Nafhesa et al., 2020: 779). The result is that new identities that combine a commitment to Islam and the freedom of choice are being formed. Doubtless, this transition may partially be a result of the increasing access to and consumption of foreign media and culture among young individuals. But it should not be underestimated that changing attitudes and values are also the product of the increase of women in public life.

A lesson we can learn from the evolution of love in the West, is that the positive values associated with love arose only after certain material conditions were met (Spring 1984: 17-20). Up until only the past hundred years, marriage functioned predominantly as an economic institution used to facilitate legally binding agreements between families. It was a means to maintain class hierarchy, sustain a continuation of bloodlines, and ensure financial security for women. However, a woman's "financial security" was only provided in exchange for what was virtually her total submission to and dependence on her assigned husband. As women were excluded from the right to work, the right to education, and the right to private ownership, marriage became their only means for financial and social security. As long as marriage represented dependence and monetary obligation, the role of love in the institution of marriage remained obsolete. To quote feminist Emma Goldman (1914: 1), "it is

⁶ I use the plural "cultures" here so as to avoid the misconception that there is a single "Islamic culture".

utterly false that love results from marriage [...] Marriage is primarily an economic arrangement, an insurance pact. It differs from the ordinary life insurance agreement only in that it is more binding, more exacting.” Only after women began making the advances in their social status did marriage begin to take on a new meaning. It was not until women were able to receive the legal recognition and financial support to break from their dependence relation with their male counterpart, that their right to choose a partner became politically validated. This meant that aspirations for romantic love could only arise after the material subjugation of her social and political existence was dealt with. Another way to recognise the importance of women’s material subjugation is through the example of birth control. The ability to remove herself from her material constraint of motherhood gave a new meaning to what love and sex could be once separated from the implications of childcare. Women could begin to trade their status of “wife and mother” for that of “human being” or “person”. The option to pursue love became viable only after shifts in attitudes about the rights of women to liberty and equal citizenship were solidified into the conceptual framework of the society. Again, I stress that these shifts, as well as their solidification, was a *political* process.

I believe the growing acceptance of love in Muslim contexts is a result of the same kind of process. Today, a girl born in most Arab countries has a much higher chance than her mother to attend post-secondary education. In Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, women outnumber men enrolled at university.⁷ This increase in education has likewise facilitated an increase of female participation in the workforce (though granted their options are still limited and typically lower paid). The result is that there is a higher chance that women born into this generation will be more capable of and comfortable with independent thought and livelihood. The crux of this issue, however, is whether this independent thought and livelihood will be recognised and incorporated into the cultural politics of public life.

Conclusion

Right now, the Middle East is in a state of transition. We have different generations pushing the region into different directions, either for the integration or suppression of new liberal values into their cultural systems. Love in Muslim contexts is caught up in an ideological struggle. And yet, what has not been recognised is that the ideological aspect of love is obsolete. In no country or culture is the meaning of love set in stone. Meanings are malleable and can change depending on their time and place. We teach ourselves what love means by the way it relates to us and our relation to the places

⁷ It should be noted that part of the overrepresentation of women at university is because male students are more likely than women to be awarded government scholarships and grants to study abroad. See al-Qazzat (1980).

we occupy in the world. In a world where the independence and equality of women poses an upheaval to the political structure, love will relate as something negative and threatening to our society. But in a world where the liberation of women is seen as coexistent with our political culture, such a threat would not exist.

There are multiple reasons why we should reengineer the meaning of love in the Middle East, but perhaps the most obvious is simply that, for a growing population, love does not denote the purge or betrayal of their Muslim identity. Rather, it signifies a new addition – an improvement – of what it means to navigate intimate relationships *within* their Muslim identity. But more importantly, the denial of the right to love is the deliberate act to deny individuals, and especially women, the right to personal sovereignty. In essence, it is the denial of the right to oneself. Concepts are set up to maintain power. In our current world, we are controlling women by controlling how and whom they may love. This control is facilitated by the legal and social structures that inhibit the mobility and significance of women in public society. Love is inhibited by the political structures that have secured their identities around the suppression of women in the name of a nebulous “Muslim culture”. However, once we recognise that love does not present any such threat to a consistent Muslim identity, that women can have the right to autonomy, the right to action, and the right to associate value where they want without losing their Muslim identity, we can acknowledge their right to love. While there may be no definitive definition of what love is, there are definitive ways love is politically preconditioned.

My aim here has been to argue that love is political. My hope is that we make it personal too.

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