



THE ENGLISH COMPLEMENT
Installment 1

HALAL THIS WAY

TOWARDS
A VIABLE QUEERING
IN SUNNI ISLAM

a foundational thesis by

MAHER ALHAJ

THE ENGLISH COMPLEMENT
Installment 1: Preface and Introduction

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*To my family, for whom I have caused inscrutable pain
in the lengthy process leading up to this work, and by
whom I have been deeply and utterly loved.*

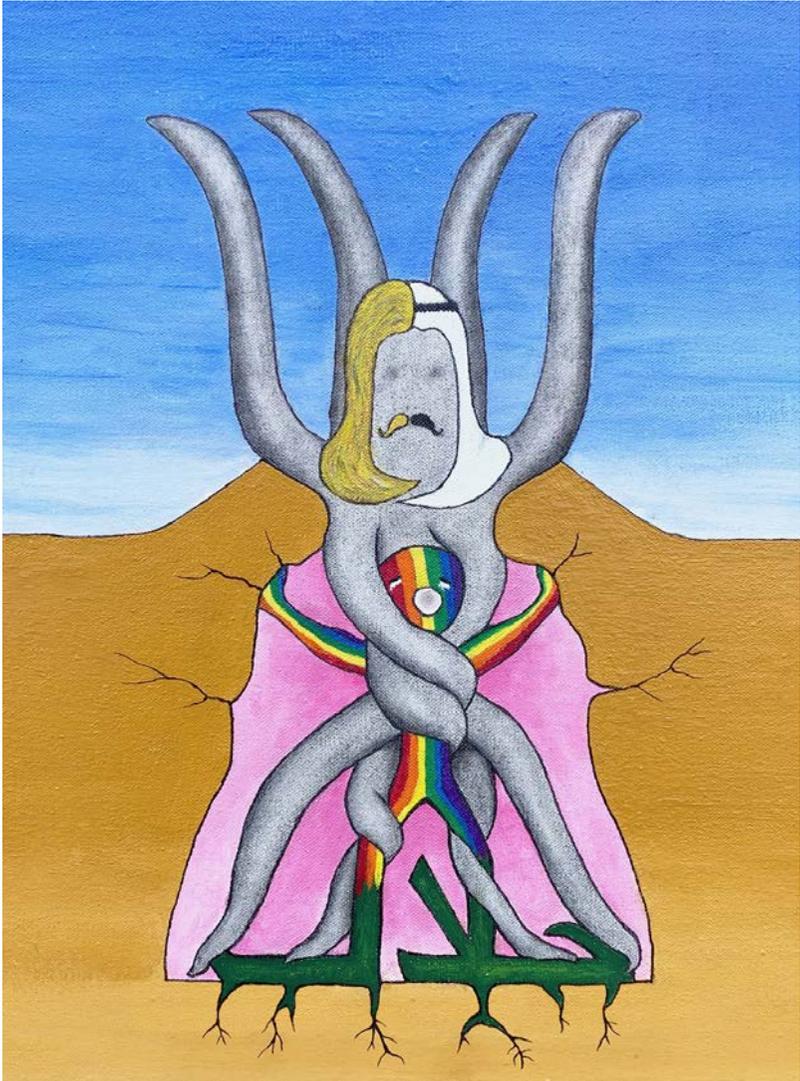


FIGURE 1: *Maw'ūd*¹

¹ Maher Alhaj, *Maw'ūd*, 2013–2019, Mixed Media on Canvas, 20" x 16", Private Collection. For a detailed meaning of this painting, see Addendum 1.

PREFACE

On Book Design

ON THE COVER AND TITLE PAGES, I inserted the phrase *The English Complement*. By “complement”, I mean a piece of writing that would help another be “more complete or effective”². That is to say, this work, *Halal This Way: Towards a Viable Queering in Sunni Islam*, is composed of two parts (“complements”). One in English that is published herein (with the title, *On the Halalizing of Queer Sexualizing: Between Neoliberalism and ‘Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah at the Onset of the Twenty-First Century*³), and another in Arabic, which I hope to publish soon (this is also why the cover of this book features only half of *Maw‘ūd*, the painting featured in Figure 1⁴). Such is the case for several reasons.

For one, writing on this topic in English and Arabic to complement one another (not just as a mere translation of each other) at this moment

² “Complement, (t.)”, in *Cambridge Dictionary* (Cambridge University Press), accessed April 24, 2021, find the URL (web page address) in the bibliography.

³ This *English Complement* was submitted as my thesis to the University of Chicago’s Master of Divinity program (I will explain its title in the introduction). This thesis, or *The English Complement*, has been through several revisions since its original submission in December 2019.

⁴ The other half of the painting is reserved for the cover of the Arabic “complement”.

in time is related to my understanding that as a *pluralistic* human species (whose varied collectives have inhabited the Earth through time, in various locations and contexts), the way in which we understand and approach the world is also varied. As groups, we are not the *exact* replicas of each other. That is (i.e.⁵), we develop uniquely in response to our unique *contexts* in *time* and *space*. For example (e.g.⁶), we believe different truths, speak different languages, and have different understandings of the world.

Therefore, while we share much at this *globalized juncture*⁷, our concerns and/or priorities about different matters (e.g., about same-sex sexuality) are *not* necessarily the same. Hence, I am convinced that this work is best written in Arabic to address the particular concerns and ways of being Arab and Muslim, and complemented in English to address other concerns that are relevant to the English-speaking world⁸, in the Academy⁹ and beyond (i.e., if we aim to address Islam, in which

5 The abbreviation “i.e.” stands for the Latin phrase *id est*, which translates to “that is”.

6 The abbreviation “e.g.” stands for the Latin phrase *exempli gratia*, which translates to “for example”.

7 By which I simply mean that we live at a time in which most parts of our world are connected, accessible, and influenced by one another in unprecedented ways.

8 For example, it was not until the editing process of this work that I fully understood some of the concerns that have been associated with the use of phrases such as “the queer” and “the homosexual” (these terms have negative connotations due to their bleak development in the “West”, which has historically pathologized and dehumanized those who are not in line with normative societal expectations of sex and gender). For me, as a non-native English speaker, the conversation has mainly been in Arabic, conceptual, and in isolation of the “Western” social contexts through which those terms evolved. I mention this not only as a disclaimer to highlight my own biases but to also emphasize that our languages, along with our various concerns as varying groups, are temporal (influenced by the time through which they take place), spatial (influenced by the place through which they take place), and contextual (influenced by the particular contexts through which they evolve). Our languages and concerns have their own evolving histories, with their own historical stigmas and developments that are not easily accessible to others.

9 By “Academy”, I mean the mainly Western “society of learned persons organized to advance art, science, or literature”, which produces “a body of established opinion widely accepted as authoritative in a particular field”. The Academy is concerned with the development, accumulation, and transmission of knowledge; see “Academy, (n.)”, in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster Inc.), accessed May 27, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

Arabic is the primary mode of communication, and the contemporary world of great Western influence in the Academy and beyond, to which English is the primary mode of communication).

For another, by writing in Arabic, whether as a complement and/or translation, I also want to emphasize the *need* to write in Arabic on this topic (queer¹⁰ sexuality in Islam at this moment in time). It is my belief that any academic work in English, or other languages, that makes conclusions about Islamic Scriptures must have fluency in the Arabic language. Arabic is central to the way Muslims understand Islam, and any serious attempt at intervention within the tradition must take Arabic seriously. To all intents, constructions, and purposes, Arabic is the language of the Islamic Scriptures (upon which much of this work builds), which also dominates the large geographic area of the contemporary Arab World (in the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and North Africa, where a large number of Muslims live).

Furthermore, writing in Arabic on this topic is also especially important in order to make a meaningful contribution to Muslim readers around the world (as this topic is generally written about only in English and/or other Western languages). It is also important because taking Arabic seriously also means taking the Arabic-speaking Muslim people seriously (when done properly, it shows goodwill) and addressing some of the *mutual* concerns of today's queer predicament in the language of the Arab Muslims. To me, this work is out of the concern and need for Arab Muslims and their Queer population, as much as it is for others.

Finally, Arabic is my native language, and I wrote in Arabic on this topic before I “joined” the Academy (for a blog I once launched and

¹⁰ I put forth an initial definition of what I mean by “queer” in the introduction and build on it later on in this work.

more). Therefore, it is only fitting that I complement this English rendition with another in Arabic (so that I am true to my own quest into the topic, address the needs and obligations I see necessary at this moment, and be intentional about the change I aspire to see).

I also want to provide guidance in this preface on how I open my chapters with *synopses* and my use of *footnotes*.

While the work is formatted as a book, it is published as an academic thesis (for it provides a theoretical framework and engages the Academy on complex and audacious matters). To make it more accessible to a broader audience interested in the topic, I open each chapter with a *synopsis*. The purpose of a synopsis is to give the essence of each chapter, especially when the reading is academically arduous¹¹.

Furthermore, I also attempt to make the reading more accessible with my use of footnotes. To that end, the book has a heavy use of footnotes¹².

11 When possible, each synopsis *introduces* the chapter and its relationship to the overall work in general; addresses the *manifest* problem or problems (an obvious problem in the world we want to address in which the chapter features); *destabilizes* the manifest problem (disrupt some of what has been taken for granted about the manifest problem in our approach to it and why); refocuses the attention on a *critical* problem (the underlying problem being ignored, evaded, mishandled, and so on); explains some of the *consequences* propagated by the unresolved critical problem; and finally, offers a concluding *message* (summarizes the major take away of the chapter, i.e., offers a “solution”, a new direction, and so on). This approach to writing was inspired by a class I took in the summer of 2018 with the Writing Program at the University of Chicago. The title of the class was “Academic and Professional Writing (Little Red Schoolhouse)”.

12 A note on general format: while this work uses the 17th edition (“full note” style, as opposed to “author-date”, or the shorter “note” citations) of *The Chicago Manual of Style* by The University of Chicago (www.chicagomanualofstyle.org), it deviates from it on certain occasions. Those occasions include the following. For instance, Halal This Way, LLC, as a publisher, prefers the placement of commas and periods *after* a closing quotation mark, not before it (e.g., “thesis.”, as opposed to “thesis.”). For another, in substitution for full website and web page addresses (Uniform Resource Locators, URLs) in “full-note” footnote-citations, a “find the URL in the bibliography” is placed. To aid in citation format, the footnote in-text citations as well as the bibliography, with some modifications, were formatted using the free and open-source Zotero software (www.zotero.org). As stated on their website, Zotero is “a project of the Corporation for Digital Scholarship, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development of software and services for researchers and cultural heritage institutions”.

This approach, to utilize chapter synopses and footnotes (as well as other tools, such as figures and infographics), stems from my conviction that “theory”¹³ is critical (for it provides and/or illuminates the basis upon which something, such as social “change”, is understood and/or built), but just as critical is its dissemination to the public sphere and transforming it into practice.

With that said, there are *at least* four ways in which I utilize footnotes.

First, I use footnotes to provide citations. Second, I use footnotes to define, elaborate on, and/or explain something in more detail (i.e., to provide what is referred to as *sharḥ*¹⁴ in Arabic literature) and remind the reader of a previously defined definition. My definitions of terms and topics are also intended to somewhat *limit* the way in which I use a term, conjure a topic, etc.¹⁵ (i.e., to bring more clarity to and focus on my intended use to be less implicated with all the other possible ways in which such topics

13 As in a “supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained”; see “Theory, (n.)”, in *Lexico Dictionaries | English* (Oxford University Press), accessed August 1, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

14 When the need arises to represent Arabic terms in English script, this work utilizes what linguists refer to as the processes of *transcription* (interested in how a word sounds in Arabic, and to the extent possible, conveying that in English, i.e., primarily interested in *spoken sounds or phonemes*), and *transliteration* (interested in orthography, as in converting the characters, spellings, etc. of the script of a language into a target script of another in a way that makes sense, i.e., primarily interested in *written symbols or graphemes*). Transcription deals with how the spoken Arabic language is systemically represented in written form. Transliteration then deals with how the spoken Arabic script is converted into Roman Latin script by swapping letters in predictable ways. For example, the strange dot on the letter “ḥ” (known as a diacritic) in the Arabic word *sharḥ* is transcribed and transliterated as such because the English letter *h* is closest in sound, but not identical, to the sound of the Arabic letter we are representing as *ḥ*. For more information on this process, see “ScriptSource - Entry - Transliteration vs. Transcription”, accessed May 1, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography. To the extent possible, this system of both transcription and transliteration honors the pronunciation of spoken Arabic and conveys how a word should be pronounced and/or represented in English. For that purpose, this work uses the Library of Congress Arabic Romanization table (with minor deviations). To access the table, labeled as Arabic (2012), see “ALA-LC Romanization Tables”, The Library of Congress, accessed May 1, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

15 The abbreviation “etc.” stands for the Latin phrase *et cetera*, which translates to “and other similar things”.

could be approached and/or terms could be used and/or defined). Third, I use footnotes to provide context and/or relevant references to support a point I make. Fourth and finally, I use footnotes to allude to the fact that I will come back to a particular subject in a later section of my thesis or remind the reader that I have started to talk about a topic in an earlier section (which alludes to some of the interwoven complexity of the thesis infrastructure).

The final point about my use of footnotes is especially important because I often define critical terms *inadequately* when I first introduce them (but I do provide preliminary working definitions). That is *intentional* and *necessary*, not only because many of the terms I invoke reference complex notions but also because I often understand them in particular ways based on my own framework (which I need to explain before I can apply). As such, I define and develop some of my critical terms *progressively*, so they are less overwhelming and become easier to grasp.

In fact, I define some of those terms in three stages, which I label as *initial* (when I initially introduce a term), *liminal* (an intermediary definition that builds on the initial definition and gives it more substance), and *applied* (a definition or definitions of a term as understood through my theoretical framework).

Suffice it to say, while the topic is complicated and the material is often dense, *slow* reading is encouraged. The footnotes are deployed to help. They provide citations, context, support, explanations, and/or guidance on what I say and mean, where I have been, and/or where I am going. Therefore, they are more *essential* than marginal¹⁶; a “do *not* skip” approach is highly recommended.

—Maher Alhaj

¹⁶ I utilize the use of Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, and so on) in this preface, and not Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, and so on) as is the convention, to emphasize the integral and continuous roles the preface plays in this work.

THE ENGLISH COMPLEMENT

ON THE ḤALALIZING OF QUEER SEXUALIZING:

*Between Neoliberalism and 'Ahl As-Sunnah
Wal-Jamā'ah at the Onset of the
Twenty-First Century*¹⁷

¹⁷ This *English Complement* was my thesis to the Ministry Program at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois). The original thesis was submitted in December 2019 to the faculty of the Divinity School (among others) in candidacy for the Degree of Master of Divinity. It has been through several revisions since.

INTRODUCTION

On Living the Quest

ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2013, I arrived home to see my dying father. I found myself in the living room awaiting the encounter. I was terrified (partly because I knew his end was near, but mainly because I had little courage to face him). Ten months prior, I started a *supposedly* scandalous blog in Arabic¹⁸ about the need to accommodate

18 My blog was supposedly scandalous for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the overall subject matter of the blog: its content which aimed to argue for the religious accommodation of homosexuality in Islam. As far as I knew, the blog was a first of its kind, promising to argue publicly in Arabic that in Sunni Islam, homosexuality (i.e., if understood within a proper framework as explicated in this thesis) should be made *ḥalāl* (i.e., permissible) within the theological and legal parameters of the tradition. However, that interpretation could not have been religiously and culturally accepted at that time, as it would go against the overwhelming Muslim Arab consensus on the sinful nature of same-sex sexuality. The second reason has to do with my intentions, which were misconstrued, especially because of the controversial name I chose for the blog. The name was “Homosexuality Is Halal”, found then @ www.homosexualityishalal.com (I unpublished the blog soon after my father’s passing towards the end of 2013). In my mind, *homosexuality is halal*, while a catchy phrase, was merely an *emphatic expression* denoting the need and hopeful end-goal of this work. To many, the phrase suggested that I was issuing a *fatwà* (a religious pronouncement/ruling) on the permissibility of homosexuality, which, if it were true, would have been indeed religiously scandalous. However, I neither had the qualifications to issue a *fatwà* nor was it my intention to do so. Therefore, my blog was *supposedly* scandalous because it was *not* scandalous (not in content, merit, or intentions). Nevertheless, I do acknowledge the shortcomings of the choices I made.

homosexuality¹⁹ in Sunni Islam²⁰. To my father, my actions were incomprehensible. He had tried to reason with me, but I would not let him. In fact, I shut him out; I did not get to speak to him in person again.

As I waited there in the living room, I heard a family member in the other room pleading with him to see me.

He refused.

He passed away a few hours later.

While I know my father deeply loved me, he could not seem to forgive me for the *shame* I brought him. In his principled mind, refusing to receive me was a lesson in *honor* (for our family and tradition), which was defiled by the *perverse* deeds of a son whose actions were viewed with utmost disgust.

I was born in modern-day Jordan in the city of Amman in 1981. I come from a Palestinian Muslim family that lost everything during the onset of the *Nakbah* in 1948²¹. As a young child, I was oblivious to the

19 Homosexuality references same-sex sexual inclination, desire, and/or behavior between members of the same biological sex. For example, female-to-female sexual attraction. It is understood today by many to be part of some people's identities (as in something they *are* and *identify with*, rather than a label purely based on *behavior*). Homosexuality, as a term, is a relatively recent formulation in reference to the same-sex sexual phenomenon. However, it was labeled and has been understood differently by different people at different times, in different spaces and contexts.

20 Sunni, as a term, references the mainstream religious group in Islam, which consists of most Muslims; see "Sunni", in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., October 4, 2019), find the URL in the bibliography. The percentage of Sunnis is roughly estimated to be around 87–90% of all Muslims; see Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population", October 7, 2009, find the URL in the bibliography. However, as people, Sunnis are also diverse in their beliefs. The term references a multiplicity of *various* orientations of being Sunni in Sunni Islam; see G. H. A. Juynboll and D. W. Brown, "Sunna", in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, April 24, 2012), find the URL in the bibliography.

21 *Nakbah* means "catastrophe" in Arabic and became associated with the crimes against humanity that have been committed against the Palestinians in their ongoing cataclysm since (but also much before) 1948. An estimated 750,000 Palestinians (including my family) were uprooted from their native homes and made refugees between 1947 and 1948. Over 75% of historic Palestine was taken by Zionist militias/forces sponsored by the West (political Zionism refers to what started as an organized European national movement calling for a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine in response to their persecution in Europe). They killed over 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass

political and economic agonies of my family²². Instead, I found agonies of my own. From a young age, I experienced a clash between my effeminate inclinations and the expectations of the world around me. But my childhood was even more complicated. With the *best* intentions for me in mind, my family sent me to a “boarding school”²³.

My first few years at the school were especially miserable. I was physically and sexually abused²⁴. I tried to escape that place in fifth

massacres and ethnically “cleansed” (i.e., annihilated) and destroyed over 500 villages; see Al Jazeera Media Network, “The Nakba Did Not Start or End in 1948”, May 23, 2017, find the URL in the bibliography. The killing, ethnic annihilation, land theft, expulsion, and destruction are still ongoing. To read more about Palestine and the ongoing predicaments of Palestinians, see the work of Professor Steve Salaita, found and/or referenced on his website: www.stevesalaita.com.

22 We come from *Lifta*, a Jerusalemite village on the northwest approaches of the Holy City. My family was violently forced into exile during the onset of the *Nakbah* in 1948. For more information, see Jacob Pace, “Ethnic Cleansing 101: The Case of Lifta Village”, *The Electronic Intifada*, March 2, 2005, find the URL in the bibliography. At the time of writing this, the remains of my paternal and maternal grandparents’ homes (where both my parents were born) still stand in the village, along with the olive press/mill that my family owned. As of now, we are still unable to claim our stolen land or return to it. The village is also on a tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage sites. However, it is at great risk of being demolished. There have been multiple plans over the years to tear it down in favor of profitable real estate development (benefiting rich Jewish settlers and their beneficiaries). For more information on this, see Mike Smith, “Ghost Village Perched in Jerusalem’s Hills May Soon Vanish”, November 16, 2017, find the URL in the bibliography. See also this article for the most recent existential threat, Aseel Jundi, “Saving Lifta: Palestinians Rally Against Latest Threat to Depopulated Jerusalem Village”, *Middle East Eye*, June 13, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography. I inserted the phrase “ethnically cleansed” after the word “depopulated” and put the word “cleansed” in quotation marks to clarify the title and to assert that this process was not peaceful and does not imply “purification”. On the contrary, this ongoing process of expulsion, destruction, displacement, land theft, and so on was forced, violent, and has aimed at annihilating the native Palestinian population.

23 The “boarding school”, overseen by a Christian organization in Germany, functioned primarily as an *orphanage*. It provided lodging, education, and other services for orphans and/or those whose families were going through extreme socioeconomic hardships.

24 Sending me away was not easy for my family either. However, my family reasoned that it was a good opportunity for me. As far as they knew, I was in a great school that would prepare me for the future (for it offered me good living accommodations, a seemingly great education, and various other opportunities I may not have had otherwise). I did not share what I was going through with my family, as I felt they were occupied with their own troubles at home. I thought I could handle it on my own. I will talk about childhood abuse, what it means, and its implications on the subject matter of this thesis later on in chapter 4.1.

grade, fantasizing about living in a cave nearby, a space where humans did not exist²⁵ (see Figure 2).

With puberty, I realized I was sexually attracted to other males²⁶. In my context, the only way people understood this attraction was as *liwāṭ* (sodomy)²⁷, and there was almost nothing I could do that would be considered worse. *Liwāṭ* implies a sinful *choice* and a destructive unnaturalness²⁸. Moreover, I was living in the heart of the land where this sin is believed to have once originated. In Jordan, *liwāṭ* invokes historical horror and generational trauma²⁹.

25 I jumped over the school's wall on a Sunday morning (while other students were at church). I walked away for hours through the hills nearby. I could not find a cave in sight. The night approached, and I needed a place to sleep. It was the 27th night of the holy month of Ramadan, the likely night of the holy month for what Muslims know as *Laylatu l-Qadr* (a special night for which the mosques stay open overnight for worship). I stayed the night at a mosque and then went home. My family was traumatized by my escape and pressed for an explanation. I could not tell them the truth. I told them I needed to observe *Laylatu l-Qadr*. The school asked my family to take me to the police station (I was considered missing, and the police were looking for me). The police officer scorned me and asked if I was scared. I rebelliously answered with a "no".

26 Sexually attracted to them the way most females are, only females were supposed to have those feelings of attraction.

27 *Liwāṭ* as sodomy is not a perfect translation. I will nuance what is meant by *liwāṭ* later on in Part 4.

28 People who commit such acts choose to do so against their own natures (how God created them). For me, I knew it was not a choice, and I could never *choose* instead to desire females sexually. The acts are also associated with bestiality, the devil, and disease. They are considered barren, unnatural, sinful choices, and as such, destructive to life and its continuation.

29 Parts of modern-day Jordan are believed to have been the historical home of the Biblical Kingdom of Moab, which is also believed to have once been home to Sodom and Gomorra (the villages that are notoriously known for their same-sex sexual "anomaly"). The Qur'ānic Prophet Lūṭ (or Lot in the Bible) is believed by many to have been sent to these villages to forewarn them about their deviant acts. However, the people of Prophet Lūṭ refused to heed the warning and were punished by God accordingly. For many Muslims, the geographic location of the Dead Sea, in particular, is perceived to have been the exact historical location of the home of the people of Lūṭ. The Dead Sea also serves as a historical witness to their destruction and a reminder to avoid sodomy at all costs. In fact, the unique nature of the Dead Sea (as being perceived *dead* within which nothing could live) conjures a haunting reminder of the wrath of God. It remains an edifice for the living and a sign about the barren and destructive nature of sodomy, the plague that could never lead to life and/or its continuation. This haunting human-landscape interaction reflects a generational trauma in the region about *liwāṭ* and its consequences.



FIGURE 2: In the Closet³⁰

30 Maher Alhaj, *In the Closet*, 2001, Pencil, 18" x 24", Private Collection. The drawing was inspired by a saying by Prophet Muhammad [Peace Be Upon Him]. To paraphrase, if one part of the body is hurt, the rest of the body suffers. The art piece references the inability to fully embrace one's self by living a contradictory double life. What I *was* could never be *out* (hence being mainly inside the cave, i.e., "in the closet"), and what was visible of me was consequently in pain (as represented by the bleeding leg in my drawing). The cave imagery here alludes to my need and desire for *protection*. Not only does the cave act as a literal geographical escape I considered while at the orphanage, but it is also a metaphorical symbol of invisibility that would protect me from the pain associated with the exposure of my "secrets" (about abuse and sexual "deviance").

Unsettled by the notion that my feelings were merely a matter of choice, while being equally unsettled by the prospect of eternal damnation, I doggedly pursued a quest for answers. I committed myself to God through our neighborhood mosque in the summer of 1995³¹. During that time, I made a few discrete attempts to inquire about my shameful *lūṭī* predicament. I also examined all available religious texts in hopes of finding alternative definitions for, or explanations of, the attraction I was experiencing. Unfortunately, I found no alternative to the sin of *liwāṭ*.

While same-sex *behavior* was always portrayed as a sinful, sordid choice, I knew that I did not *choose* my *inclination*. I could intuit, even then, a rift between my thoughtfully interrogated experiences and all the feedback I was receiving³². Alternately, I seriously considered the possibility that I was possessed by a *Jinn*³³, and at other times, wondered if I was the product of a genetic mutation. I became clinically depressed and ended up isolating myself. My family tried their best to help me, but I would not open up to them; I *could not* open up to them.

When I came to the United States in January of 2000, I was enrolled in high school. I was desperate for healing. I needed to rid myself of the *lūṭī* plague that was infesting me, so I confided in two of my teachers.

31 I needed to get closer to God. I had no doubt that He would help me.

32 The way the feedback framed and shamed my feelings did not seem to resonate with my narrative. The underlying assumption, whether from contemporary Sunni scholars in light of their understandings of the Scriptures or the historical writings I found on the matter, was that everyone is heterosexual by *default* (I use the term “heterosexual” realizing that heterosexuality is also a relatively recent linguistic formulation in reference to sexual inclination, attraction, and expressed behavior between members of the opposite biological sex, as in males-to-females and females-to-males).

33 Muslims believe that as God created humans, He also created other categories of beings, such as the category of *Jinn* (who are believed by many to have the ability to possess humans); see Jacqueline Chabbi, “Jinn”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, accessed November 17, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

One became concerned and alerted the school’s social worker³⁴, and the other believed in the possibility of a “cure” and introduced me to Focus on the Family³⁵. Despite these interventions, I could neither heal nor change. Feeling disgusted by my failure, I left home abruptly after high school and moved far away from my family.

I continued to seek answers from trustworthy Muslim scholars but to no avail. From their perspective, the matter was incontrovertibly simple: I had a latent heterosexual desire that I needed to act upon; all I needed to do was marry the right Muslim female. They believed that such was the case for the other *lūtiēs*, and my case was no different. While I insisted otherwise, they gently listened but were not able to understand; they *could not* have (i.e., religious wisdom did not allow them theological room to understand). At my insistence on an alternative explanation, I was unknowingly implying something beyond *our* worldview and all of its perceived *axiomatic*³⁶ possibilities. It was becoming clear to me that they, too, were perhaps missing *something*³⁷.

I became increasingly frustrated. However, I was inspired by an article from the founder of Focus on the Family on the origin of homosexuality³⁸. The article was addressed to Christian parents and discussed the

34 The teacher alerted the school’s social worker after a class assignment in which I wrote a speech and read it to the class. It was titled “The Case Against Homosexuality”, and at the time, I thought homosexuality was a proper English translation for *liwāf*. In that speech, I talked about AIDS as God’s punishment for the “homosexual” community.

35 Focus on the Family is what some may label as a conservative Christian organization. It was founded in 1977 by James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

36 As in unquestionable and/or self-evident. It is an adjective of the noun *axiom*, “a statement or principle that is generally accepted to be true, but need not be so”; see “Axiom, (n.)”, in *Cambridge Dictionary* (Cambridge University Press), accessed April 23, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

37 As in a “thing that is unspecified or unknown”; see “Something, (pron.)”, in *Lexico Dictionaries | English* (Oxford University Press), accessed November 5, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

38 The letter was written by Dr. James Dobson in observance of Father’s Day in 2002 to emphasize the critical role of Christian fathers and mothers, in the development of homosexuality and how it

onset and prevention of “pre-homosexual” signs in children. It featured the story of a teenager whose suffering was all too real for me. I perceived the work of Focus on the Family as tremendously valuable, and I wanted to build a similar platform for my own Muslim community. It wasn’t long before I moved back in with my family and started college.

In college, I utilized every opportunity I could to learn about same-sex attraction and the diversity of experiences that make up our human sexualities. I was especially intrigued by the “Nature versus Nurture” debate³⁹. With my particular past, expectedly, the latter seemed more convincingly probable to me. The more I learned, however, the less certain I was that nurture was the primary “cause”.

While at some point I could no longer ignore the role of biology, I still perceived the matter as morally reprehensible. I thought that homosexuality was a treatable condition akin to biological diseases. I insisted that if God condemns *liwāṭ*, then it must be a human choice and a bad one at that (because God would not condemn people for something they cannot choose or control).

However, my insistence on delegitimizing my own sexual condition was not without terrible vexation. I knew I neither chose my *lūṭī*-like feelings nor did I seem to have any control over them, so why would God condemn me? Why would God create me with an exclusive same-sex sexual orientation, forbid me to act on it, and/or hold me accountable for it? With my embodied (what Muslims would call *fiṭrī*) convictions about the nature of a Just God, this seemed like a contradiction to me; I had doubts.

could be prevented; see James Dobson, “Family News from Dr. James Dobson”, *Focus on the Family*, Monthly, no. 6 (June 2002).

³⁹ That is, whether the manifestation of homosexuality was due to natural causes (and therefore assumed acceptable) or a result of environmental causes and failures (and thus in need of intervention). I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 3.3.

Eventually, influenced by newer educational and social contexts, and perhaps amidst a primordial need to survive, my perspective was about to change. As the Editor-in-Chief of my college newspaper at the time, I decided to take what would become a painful yet extraordinary leap of faith. I used my public platform and “outed” myself⁴⁰.

However, this leap of faith was *just* a leap of faith; coming out did not provide a satisfactory answer or a way forward. Eternal damnation remained *as real* as it was before, and so did the nearly impossible task of finding viable acceptance within my tradition’s long and sophisticated scholarly legacy on the matter. No matter my feelings about the nature of God, I had to answer to the venerably immutable religious consensus⁴¹ on the proscription of *liwāt*. I also needed to somehow justify to myself and my family everything I had put us through.

I strongly felt that there was a place for me in God’s schema just beyond what I had been told and could grasp at the time, and I yearned to reach it. Otherwise, my insistence on the injustice of the status quo would have been fruitlessly hurtful and disappointingly in vain. In any case, I needed to be convinced by *the* truth (whatever it was). I had no choice but to press on with my quest.

My journey of finding my truth was long and painful. A turning point, however, was the realization that a critical *misunderstanding* exists between my tradition’s perception and/or classification of homosexuality (inundated by our understanding of *liwāt*) and the reality of what homosexuality is and should be understood to mean.

In fact, there exists a *larger* misunderstanding about the nature and

⁴⁰ In doing so, I wrote two articles: Maher Alhaj, “My Interest in Sex Research”, *The Mirror News*, March 22, 2005, and Maher Alhaj, “My Reconciliation Between Islam and Homosexuality”, *The Mirror News*, April 5, 2005.

⁴¹ I will discuss the meaning of religious consensus, its implication for this topic, and the difficulty in challenging it within Sunni Islam (as well as the way around that) in Part 4.

workings of human sexuality within Islamic conceptualizations⁴². When understood *appropriately*, I am convinced there are viable paths within a Sunni framework that would allow for fruitful reevaluation and even accommodation of a larger range of human sexual categories and/or experiences. As hard as it is to even imagine that at present, it is inevitably a matter of time before such categories are accepted, protected, and even celebrated. This was the conversation I wanted to have through my blog in 2012–2013⁴³.

My blog was raw, amateur, and, in many ways, a failure, but within the ten months it was active, it received over 68,000 page views, hundreds of emails, and comments from around the world, and attracted volunteers and even financial contributions. I attempted to tell the truth about homosexuality in Sunni Islam as I knew it then.

My blog touched the lives of many with whom my journey resonated. It also exposed me to the wide variety of existential struggles faced by many Queer⁴⁴ Muslims and/or Arabs all over the world. Between the

42 For example, the dominant understanding is that Islamic theology and law could only accommodate human sexuality through the lens of sexual and gender binaries (God creates males or females, males must desire females sexually and females must desire males sexually, and males must act as males and females must act as females). This is a *misunderstanding* that I address in Parts 3 and 4 of this thesis.

43 To read more about what I have been up to during that time, please refer to an interview with My.Kali, a “conceptual webzine for/from the Middle East and North Africa”; see Maher Alhaj, “Homosexuality is Halal? On the Fight for Human Dignity!”, interview by Julijan Rahaleh, January 11, 2013, find the URL in the bibliography.

44 I will give a nuanced definition of what I mean by the term queer in chapter 1.5. For now (i.e., initial definition), let us assume that Queer individuals are those whose sex, gender, and/or sexual orientations are not in line with normative societal expectations (such as men who have a sexual attraction to other men). The use of the term Queer represents the diversity and intersectionality of all our identities that challenge and blur the heterosexual status quo. Furthermore, I am using the term “Queer” with a capital “Q” to emphasize that this is not just an umbrella term describing individuals who identify outside the normative heterosexual matrix, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, etc., but also an *identity* some individuals intentionally take to destabilize the heterosexual and gender binaries (as such, I capitalize the term Queer when Queer individuals and their populations are referenced).

outpouring of Queer individuals turning to me for support and the traumatic rupture with my father, I was exceedingly overwhelmed. Without the resources or the strength to continue, I decided to put things on hold.

My lifelong immersion in this quest eventually led me to the Ministry Master’s Program at the University of Chicago Divinity School (Swift Hall). Given the nature of its institutionalized discourse around diversity (in response to pressing contemporary matters), the Divinity School presented me with unique opportunities and challenges.

While I was concerned about the larger political context in which the conversation about homosexuality in Islam takes place prior to joining Swift Hall⁴⁵, my primary focus then was to translate my lifelong research and findings into a constructive conversation *within* my tradition (i.e., to improve the predicament of sexual minorities within Sunni Islam). After joining the academic ministry program at Swift Hall, however, my concerns took on a broader dimension that focused on trying to understand the *larger* political and socioeconomic context in which such conversations take place in “the West” (often for purposes that aim to improve the predicament of sexual minorities in the Muslim Arab world and others).

As an immigrant to the United States, someone from an Arab⁴⁶, Palestinian, Muslim, and Queer background, I found myself immersed in what I perceived as a problematic rendering of inter-faith, -race, and -communal dialogues. This is relevant because these *inter*-platforms are often the medium through which complicated matters about the

⁴⁵ For example, inherent to the Western international approach to advocate for gender and sexual minorities in Muslim Arab spaces is the *dehumanization* of Arabs, Muslims, and Islam in the process.

⁴⁶ On what “Arab” means beyond the spoken language, see “Arab | Description, History, & Facts”, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., March 11, 2019), find the URL in the bibliography.

predicament of the Queer-other (especially in non-Western spaces such as those in the Arab world) are often contextualized.

In effect, such *inter*-dialogues were less about *inter*-spaces that recognized and/or negotiated real differences between *different* groups (which is what the term “inter” usually implies), and often about homogenizing *diverse* ways of being (at home and abroad) into politically “correct” ones⁴⁷ (in other words, the *inter* was often a presumed *intra*⁴⁸). For example, instead of giving space to investigate the assumptions and motivating principles underlying a dominant narrative and its peoples (and their radical differences from other narratives and peoples), we

47 Because political and religious understandings, by their very nature, stem from varying orientations and contexts, they could not possibly be universalized to all political systems and contexts. Thus, the amalgamation of all various political orientations into a dominant one could only be done at the detriment of others and is thus not acceptable or fair. I will talk about this in detail in Parts 1 and 2, as well as how this conversation manifests in relation to the Muslim Arab queer predicament in Part 3.

48 We often embark on dialogues about inter-spaces (such as interfaith, for example) not only because we are different from one another but mainly because such differences often constitute *existential* threats to one another. For me, dialogues about inter-spaces, especially at the global level, should be about a negotiation between the various spaces in the hopes of finding common ground (which *would* recognize what we share in common but also honor real differences and does not aim to annihilate them), to peacefully coexist (among perhaps other objectives such as learning from one another). Such dialogues should not aim to annihilate the existence, viewpoints, and/or positions of the other (as often demonstrated). That stems from my belief that while we all belong to the same human species, not all of us want to live the same way. The objective for me is not to find *universal* agreement (which would not honor real differences but aim to annihilate them) on how a group of people should be or become, think and live, *within their own spaces*, but more on how they could coexist with the others of, from, and/or in different spaces (in spite of the presence of radical differences). What I often come across, however, are “abusively naive” attempts at inter-spaces that aim to make all varied narratives part of the politically and powerfully hegemonic one (such attempts are “naive” because they do not acknowledge real human differences, and “abusive” because they are nurtured by dominant power structures that aim to annihilate and/or co-opt the narratives of the weaker ones). That is, the conversation becomes about the coexistence in one *intra*-space, or *within* a space (which is also important but as a different kind of diversity), as opposed to *inter*-spaces, or *in-between* spaces, which in theory would lead to one way of being diverse on the global level. That seems to me to negate and violate the very nature of collective human realities, as I will explain further throughout my thesis. Such attempts at inter-space dialogues (when they advocate for a dominant politically correct narrative) are less about honoring the various existing spaces having a functional *inter*- or *in-betweenness* and more about them converging into one dominant “intra” narrative.

were required by systemic design to operate and create within a narrow paradigm of language and principles that could only uphold the dominant political narrative at the detriment of all others. That is, people could be diverse for as long as their diversity does not violate the core sensibilities of the dominant political structure.

Such narrow conceptualizations of diversity, I believe, do not live up to their full potential because they ignore real and often “legitimate” differences. Furthermore, they cannot be scaled to a global level because one group’s history, narrative, conflicts, and/or resolutions to such conflicts cannot easily be mapped onto the modalities of groups with different histories and contexts.

I think a part of the problem in terms of approaching diversity through this lens (when homogenizing all ways of being into one politically dominant narrative and visualizing the world through one “intra” lens) is a core *misunderstanding* of the developmental⁴⁹ (sometimes incommensurable) differences between the various groups within our species.

That is to say that we have often (mis)understood our differences through a *limited* lens of human “development”. I say “limited” because this homogenizing and politically dominant developmental understanding of human diversity is generally warranted by a universalizing *presupposition* through which all human collectives are viewed as *invariable*⁵⁰.

Indeed, what is missing is a more developmentally *pluralistic*

⁴⁹ I will discuss what I mean by “developmental” in chapter 1.3. For now (i.e., initial definition), I want to imply that as diverse groups, we grow or “evolve” differently (to an extent) in response to our varying times (e.g., we do have different histories), places (e.g., we do live in different geographies), and contexts (e.g., we do have different contexts), all of which contribute to who and what we are, and how we approach the world.

⁵⁰ That is, as groups, we develop exactly the same, must understand the world exactly the same, and must desire to live and approach life exactly the same.

framework, one through which our differences as a pluralistic human species, and therefore as collectives, is viewed; a framework that does not treat our developmental differences as trivial and/or simply annihilate all of us into one dominant way of being. That is, one that views our pluralism as developmentally *variable*⁵¹. This needs to be the case because this developmental pluralism is part of our nature as a human species (i.e., this is how we are made and intended to be, we cannot simply ignore it).

In other words, it seems true to me (based on what we know in terms of human development but also from the various manifestations of our human collectives throughout time, space, and context) that we, as groups, are in some ways fundamentally different (to a substantial extent) in terms of how we approach the world⁵², and that our differences stem from our various systemic developments expressed through our distinct manifestations of religious, political, and socioeconomic realities that constitute our respective habitats. As such, we are not all exactly the same. If we are not exactly the same, then we need to work within a platform of “co-existence” that honors our developmental differences (which we fail to do in a viable way at present). With this premise, the conversation about how we should *coexist* needs to be pushed further.

Consequently, I have spent a considerable amount of my time at the university thinking about politically correct and universalizing narratives⁵³ that are predominant at this globalized juncture and their

51 This is not to say that we are “subspecies” either, for reasons I will discuss in chapter 1.3.

52 Such as in terms of how we respond to our surroundings experientially from the varying metaphysical (which has something to do with determining the “real” nature of things) and epistemological (which has something to do with knowledge, as in how and what we “know”, etc.) starting points, and their consequently very different metaphysical and epistemological understandings of what, why, and who authorizes, grounds, and motivates the various collectives.

53 As they relate to the coexistence between the various collectives of our species and interventions with our world’s diverse social, economic, and political problems, and so on.

relationship to global power⁵⁴ structures (how the world is organized and who gets to dictate what, and why). More specific to this body of work, I also take a particular interest in how these dominant political narratives have *historically*, and more recently, contributed inauspiciously to *the queer predicament*⁵⁵ of and in Muslim Arab spaces.

I am most concerned, however, with the *now* (as in the present theological/cultural predicaments) and how to constructively proceed from here (hence, comes this work with all its particularities). With that said, the past few years at the University of Chicago have been critically formative. They have contributed to my overall narrative and shaped much of the way in which I choose to present it. I debut my contributions to this conversation (i.e., queer issues in Islam within the larger contemporary socioeconomic and political framework) herein as my thesis for the candidacy to the University's Master of Divinity.

Before I proceed, however, I want to provide a preview of my agenda onward in this *English Complement*⁵⁶.

The title for *The English Complement* is *On the Ḥalalizing of Queer Sexualizing: Between Neoliberalism and 'Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā' ah at the Onset of the Twenty-First Century*. As a title, it is not only particular⁵⁷ but

⁵⁴ I discuss what I mean by power in Part 2. For now (i.e., initial definition), power means a “capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events”; see “Power, (n.)”, in *Lexico Dictionaries | English* (Oxford University Press), accessed May 9, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

⁵⁵ I refer to this as the “queer predicament”, as in the singular “predicament” as opposed to the plural “predicaments”, not because I think there is only one “predicament”, but because I want to highlight *the* overarching contemporary context in which the struggles of Queer Muslim Arabs could not be just “blamed on” Islam and/or the Arab culture, but also on the West’s understanding of the topic and its global imposition of such a formulation at this moment in time.

⁵⁶ For more on what I mean by *The English Complement*, please refer back to the preface.

⁵⁷ As in “specific”. I invoke specific terminology, not others, as relevant to my thesis, such as queer, neoliberalism, *'Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā' ah*, and the specification of the twenty-first century.

also very peculiar⁵⁸ indeed. What do I mean by *ḥalalizing* and *sexualizing*? Also, what do I mean by “Queer”, and why choose it over “safer” substitutes?⁵⁹ Why the implication of an oppositional pull between neoliberalism (as a secular⁶⁰ capitalist⁶¹ structure) and *’Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā’ah* (as a religious structure), as they relate to the Sunni Arab Queer today? Why between neoliberalism and *’Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā’ah*, and not other forces or power structures? See Figure 3.

What is neoliberalism⁶², and how does it figure into the conversation on queer sexuality in Sunni Islam? Do I imply that there is something wrong with the “neoliberal” approach, as it champions “Queer rights” internationally and especially in Arab and Muslim spaces⁶³?

Additionally, who are *’Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā’ah*⁶⁴, and where do they stand on the topic? Do I also seem to imply that they, too, are perhaps

58 As in “strange”. The way I invoke such terminology in the title is also strange, as in adding *-ing* to certain terms, such as the case with *ḥalalizing* and *sexualizing*.

59 This is especially odd for a work interested in Islamic theology and law such as this one because the term “queer” usually invokes a certain *fluidity* that defies historically held definitions about sex and gender as *concrete*, *discrete* and *stable* categories. I will discuss its meaning and why I chose it in more detail in chapter 1.5 and Part 4.

60 What I mean by secular, for now (i.e., initial definition), is a non-religious system of power (I will nuance this definition in Part 2).

61 Capitalism, for now (i.e., initial definition), is the “economic and political system in which a country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state”; see “Capitalism, (n.)”, in *Lexico Dictionaries | English* (Oxford University Press), accessed May 9, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

62 For now (i.e., initial definition), it is the capitalist economic and sociopolitical force dominating the organization of the world today. I will discuss it in more detail and build on its definition in chapter 1.4 and Parts 2 and 3.

63 I use spaces as opposed to people and geographies because Sunni Muslims as clusters are no longer confined to certain geography at this global juncture.

64 The phrase is roughly translated as “the people of the prophetic precedent and the consensus of the community”. For now (i.e., initial definition), it is a way of being a Sunni, and various Sunni groups claim the title. I will define this progressively. In particular, I will nuance it in chapter 1.4, then again in chapter 2.2, and reiterate it in chapter 4.1.

Major Contemporary Contributors to the Queer Predicament in Islam

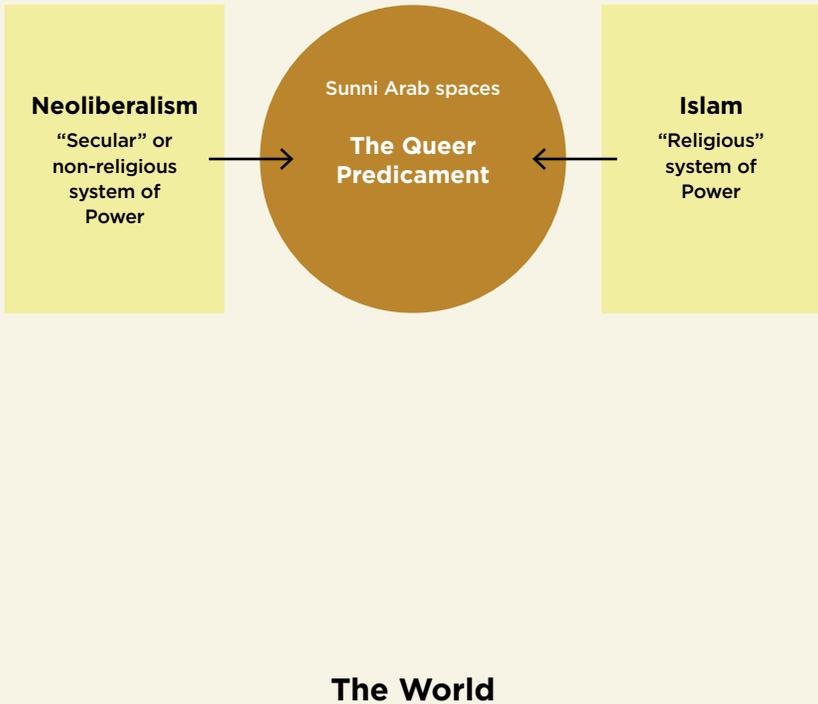


FIGURE 3: The Queer Predicament

somewhat guilty in their negotiation of the matter? Can queer matters even be accommodated in Sunni Islam?

Are there constructive ways to approach this topic globally? And also, why the specification of the onset of the twenty-first century? Does our *contemporary* context differ radically from the *past* as we conjure up the topic and its urgency? If so, how?

These are the questions, among others, which guided the direction of my thesis, and which I hope to answer in this *English Complement*. With that said, I divided *The English Complement* into five parts, with five chapters each.

The first part (i.e., 1.1–1.5) is titled “On Convening the Problem”. As the title suggests, I envisage here the main problem, which has to do with how the West has been dealing with the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces. In particular, one of the main issues in the Western approach centers around a problematic *universalization*⁶⁵ and imposition of the Western queer predicament (i.e., in terms of its diverse histories, realities, subjectivities, and/or professed solutions) onto other queer spaces that are not Western. Part 1 is the first of two parts through which I lay out my theoretical framework (Part 2 is the second). I begin constructing my theoretical framework by addressing various facets of the problem in Part 1 and providing critical definitions.

The second part (i.e., 2.1–2.5) is titled “On the Geometry⁶⁶ of Power and Meanings of the Secular”. Having introduced the problem and outlined important definitions in Part 1, I continue to build my foundational

⁶⁵ As in perceiving that one group’s unique understanding and approach about something is applicable to all contexts and people of the world.

⁶⁶ Geometry is the “branch of mathematics concerned with the properties and relations of points, lines, surfaces, solids, and higher dimensional analogs [representations]”; see “Geometry, (n.)”. In *Lexico Dictionaries* | English. Oxford University Press. Accessed November 9, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

theoretical framework in Part 2. The second part mainly explores various power structures around which different human collectives have assembled themselves. I use basic geometrical shapes, relations, and/or concepts to depict these structures in an attempt to highlight the *differences* in the relevant critical roles they play in the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces in the twenty-first century. In turn, this power analysis affords me the ability to critique the contemporary queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces in particular ways, allows me to build on previously introduced definitions, and construct new ones necessary for my critiques in Parts 3 and 4.

The third part (i.e., 3.1–3.5) is titled “On the *Anthropocentric*⁶⁷ Queering of Sunni Arab Spaces”. Finally, having built up my theoretical foundation in Part 1 and Part 2, I begin my criticism in Part 3. I focus on the *neoliberal* approach in queering⁶⁸ Sunni Arab spaces here. Ultimately, I posit that the neoliberal approach to queering Sunni Arab spaces politically, scientifically, and religiously (the various manifestations of the neoliberal approach) has been violent and betrays its own *professed* “liberal”⁶⁹ narrative.

The Fourth Part (i.e., 4.1–4.5) is titled “On the *Theocentric*⁷⁰ Queering of Sunni Arab Spaces”, in which I focus on the approach of *Sunni Islam*. Ultimately, I posit that the Sunni approach to queering Sunni Arab spaces theologically, scripturally, and jurisprudentially or legally (the

67 What I mean by anthropocentric, for now (i.e., initial definition), is *human*-centered. I will nuance this definition in Part 2.

68 I want to initially define *queering* as a *method* to approach, understand, re-evaluate, and/or intervene with established conceptions about sex and gender as they relate to the contemporary understanding and/or understandings of the Queer subject.

69 For now (i.e., initial definition), “liberalism” is a political doctrine that values “democracy”, “progressive” agendas, and “the freedom of the individual” as central to its political system. I will build on this definition in chapter 1.4 and discuss it further in chapter 2.3.

70 What I mean by theocentric, for now (i.e., initial definition), is *God*-centered. I will nuance this definition in Part 2.

ways in which human matters are negotiated within the tradition) has been a matter of *misunderstanding* and not true to its *professed* “theocentric” narrative. Part 3 and Part 4 are both critical and constructive.

Finally, the Fifth Part (i.e., 5.1–5.5) is titled “On Convening a Way Forward”. Having critiqued both the approaches of *Neoliberalism* and *’Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā’ah* in queering Sunni Arab spaces, I offer concluding remarks on how we could visualize a way forward in relation to a *responsible* queering of Sunni Arab spaces. This part alludes to a way forward but does not necessarily construct it (for such construction is best approached in a dedicated work).

To conclude this introduction, my thesis in this *English Complement*, at best, provides a preliminary outline of the queering predicament of Sunni Arab spaces at the onset of the twenty-first century while also pointing towards a constructive path forward⁷¹. I outline the situation to the best of my abilities, knowing that there is space for improvement. I recognize I have at times glazed over certain issues superficially, and far too often, I have not done justice to the authors, arguments, and disciplines I invoke⁷².

71 While my thesis spans many fields and, at times, features some of my original research and/or theoretical framing with some painful details, it should not be taken as a comprehensive academic endeavor. I think of it more as a synthesis of what I have encountered and understood in relation to the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces.

72 This is the case perhaps because this topic ought to be approached multi-disciplinarily and digested as such. The topic is not simply relegated to the humanities, but to the natural, social, and formal sciences, and certainly the Arts (e.g., my own artwork tells a specific embodied struggle on the topic that I could not simply verbalize). However, with such a multidisciplinary approach comes the inevitable impossibility of representing the sophisticated works of *any* and *all* the authors invoked in the body of the present work. I also do not pretend to understand all the complexity and sophistication of any of the authors I use, for their contributions are often the result of their lifelong engagement with their fields and subfields (which I could never reproduce or faithfully represent). I came to truly respect their dedication and commitments to their own truths and attempted to deal with them with reverence, regardless of my disagreements or the damages some of their scholarships may have inflicted. On that note, I am reminded today of a statement written to me in fifth grade by my Islamic studies teacher. He advised me not to debase those who are younger than me and to venerate my elders, for I am both young and old at the same time. This is the transliteration and transcription of his words: “*walā tuḥaqirran^{aa} ṣaghīrak^{ka}, wa-waqīr kabīrak^{ka} fa-’innak^{ka} ṣaghīr^{am} wa-kabīr[?]*”.

With that said, when I invoke certain authors, my invocation is to the best of my estimation of *an* aspect of their *work*, not a judgment on their *persons*⁷³. It is not my intention to hold anyone responsible for any idea that I do not see in favorable terms but rather highlight the rhetoric entangled in such ideas in the academic and public spheres.

Moreover, there is also the inherent impossibility of being encompassingly fair to the varying methodologies and commitments of the invoked disciplines and their subfields. For such an ambitious project, I humbly lack the multi-disciplinary academic training necessary (and it is also something beyond the scope of my own personal commitments and the project at hand).

Ultimately, what I present here is not about authors, disciplines, and their methodologies, but merely an exposition of how *I* have come to untangle the entanglements through which I have been embodied and assembled. It is an unveiling of my truth, vision, and the onerous quest into them. To *that* I invite you.

⁷³ My invocations are also at best myopic and represent a limited understanding of specific ideas in which those authors may have been engaged. I critique how I *personally* understood some of their contributions (from primary sources and related secondary derivatives) but not necessarily the entire substance of their contributions. Not only that an expressed published idea at a specific time in the past is not representative of where an author may be at present (and that is undoubtedly true of many of my own ideas), for our growth and knowledge accumulation is a process. But it is also possible (even with the best of care) that ideas are misunderstood and misconstrued. That is especially true when ideas are taken in isolation out of the context through which they may have emanated. Furthermore, there is also the reality that many authors do not have full agency over what they publish, and that publishers often steer what they perceive as publication-worthy in specific directions.

ADDENDUM I

On Maw'ūd

MAW'ŪDⁱ REPRESENTS THE STRUGGLES FACED by gender and sexual minorities in Muslim Arab spaces. The title of the painting is in reference to the pre-Islamic Arab and tribal custom of killing female infants alive (*Wa'd al-Banāt*ⁱⁱ). The painting is a metaphor for the struggles faced by sexual and gender minorities in Muslim and Arab spaces, for the ignorance of their existence is akin to “burying them alive”.

The rainbow-colored creature represents non-conforming sexual phenomena (the choice for the rainbow as a color to this creature is used to reference an *example* of sexual and gender nonconformity, and is not meant to limit the struggles to same-sex sexuality or to exclude other sexual and gender variations from such struggles). The octopus-looking creature at the center represents the *structure* of oppression, head-dressed with a *Kufiyah* on one side (a popular cliché connoting the Arab world) and blond hair on the other (a racialized cliché connoting the West), as well as with facial hair (a universal cliché connoting heteropatriarchy).

i *Maw'ūd* is the painting featured in the preface.

ii Leemhuis, “*Wa'd Al-Banāt*”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed. (Brill, 2012).

The side connoting the West is ever so slightly placed on top of the side connoting the East. This artistic placement-imposition is to showcase Western *dominance* in terms of political and socio-economic power at this moment in time.

The painting intends to reference the contributions of different forces (the East and West) to the contemporary predicament of sexual minorities in Muslim Arab spaces. Several arms of the octopus rise *above* the ground to represent the political, religious, cultural, and scientific *tools* of queer-misrepresentation. They rise above the ground to affirm structures of oppression as they contribute to the suffocation of non-conforming sexual phenomena.

The sky is blue (as the stereotypical color of “masculinity”), for it represents the heteronormative *environment* in which the tools of oppression are manifest. The grave (that is, the hole under the ground in which the rainbow-colored creature is confined), is pink (as the stereotypical color of “femininity”), for it references one alternative (and there are many) to the existing spaces of non-conforming sexual minorities, as well as to the desire of heteropatriarchy to keep those minorities (and all non-heteronormative patriarchal expressions) under the ground.

The arms of the octopus *below* the ground (connoting clandestine, but often outright, *misrepresentation* of sexual minorities whether in terms of genuine unawareness, hypocrisy and/or active suppression) are actively suffocating the sexually non-conforming individual (who is literally growing out of the Arabic word “حلال” which transliterates to “*ḥalāl*”). The word *ḥalāl* is an Islamic technical term that implies legal permissibility and legitimacy, and in this context embodies the desire of the non-conforming individuals to be accepted for who and what they are, as God’s creation (and to eventually grow out of and/or leave the grave).

The well-established roots reference a long history of sexual nonconformity. While such nonconformity has been understood variably in the past, it has nevertheless existed and persisted, and will continue to do so. Despite being confined underground, sexual and gender nonconforming individuals are “alive” as depicted in the roots’ green color. The roots sustain such phenomena and are an optimistic reference to the potential for growth, as well as to the inevitability of future visibility, acceptance and accommodation. The grave will eventually break open and unearth what is underneath. This will be true especially as sexual and gender minorities continue to assert their historically-rightful place in a natural progression of events that could only lead to their emancipation (which we see represented by their resistance *upward* against the ceiling of their grave, and consequently cracking the stone under which they are buried).

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A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

It is with great privilege that I can share this online publication with you. This installment is a part of my book, *Halal This Way: Towards a Viable Queering in Sunni Islam*.

My quest into this topic has been a lifelong journey, and being gay in a Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim context has defined my existence. I felt lost ever since I became cognizant of my queer-predicament. There was no clarity on what I was going through. The research to get the answers was not easy, and getting there was tremendously costly (both on personal and financial levels). What you read here is a product of that onerous journey.

To be truly honest with you, I needed to do this work on my terms and with my principles intact. I realized early on that the only way for me to do so is to start my own platform. This is why Halal This Way, LLC (the official publisher of this work) was conceived.

I am both humbled and proud of the work I have done on this topic so far. To be able to construct a viable path towards the theological and legal acceptance of queer matters in Sunni Islam at this moment in time is not an easy task. This work is especially complicated given the global political and socioeconomic context in which it operates. However, I am convinced that there is a viable way to do so, which I highlight in this publication (as a whole). As such, it is only a matter of time within Sunni Islam before many categories of Queer Muslims are accepted, accommodated, even celebrated.

With that said, it is very difficult for my work to continue, and for Halal This Way, LLC to succeed, without consistent funding. For me to continue this work full time (which I have been doing for the most part without financial support), and to take my organization off the ground, I need to raise funds. Among other things, this funding will help me continue the editing process, the typesetting of the book, cover the printing costs, and some living expenses. Most importantly, however, your generous contribution will help me build this platform and ensure its continuity.

I cannot thank you enough for your support and whatever one-time or monthly contribution you choose to make as an investment in me and in Halal This Way, LLC. It has been an honor to undertake this project and to share it with you. Please consider contributing to it if you are in a position to do so.

To contribute, please go to **www.halalthisway.org**. To connect with me personally, please email: **maher@halalthisway.org**.

Salam, thank you, and best regards!

Maher Alhaj