

CHAPTER 2

Gay Imperialism:

Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror'

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Suddenly everybody wants a piece of the Paki pie.

(Jaheda Choudhury, *Out of Place* conference, 25 March 2006)

How do we explain the new omnipresence of (some) queers of colour?¹ Muslim gays and lesbians have received their debut in TV programmes, newspaper articles, research projects and political events. At first sight, this development is new and welcome. It breaks with the imposed silence of those who have traditionally fallen out of the simple representational frames of a single-issue identity politics. Other queers of colour, however, continue to lack a public voice. Moreover, as Leslie Feinberg (2006) observes, the interest in Muslim gays and lesbians has emerged from a global context of violent Islamophobia. This raises the question of which stories are being circulated and how they contest or reinforce racism. It is also questionable what interest other actors have in this new politics of queer of colour representation, notably white gays, lesbians, feminists and queers.

¹ We use 'queer' as an umbrella term for coalitions between people of various marginalised gender and sexual identities. We are aware of the traps of this usage. First, it is increasingly equated with 'gay'. Mirroring this gay assimilationism, it is homophobia rather than transphobia or sex-work phobia which is most interesting to current imperialist subjectivities. This is also why gay Muslims, rather than transgender or sex-working Muslims, are at the centre of this debate. The second problem with queer, which we explore in this article, is that many queers identify as anti- or post-identity and hence outside of racism and other power relations.

Our article focuses on the situation in Britain, where 'Muslim' and 'homophobic' are increasingly treated as interchangeable signifiers. The central figure in this process is Peter Tatchell who has successfully claimed the role of the liberator of and expert about Muslim gays and lesbians. This highlights the problems of a single-issue politics of representation, which equates 'gay' with white and 'ethnic minority' with heterosexual. At the same time, the fact that Tatchell's group *Outrage* passes as the emblem of queer and hence post-identity politics in Britain shows that the problem of Islamophobia is not reducible to the critique of identity. The active participation of right- as well as left-wing, feminist as well as gay, official as well as civil powers in the Islamophobia industry proves racism more clearly than ever to be a *white* problem, which crosses other social and political differences.

Racism is, further, the vehicle that transports white gays and feminists into the political mainstream. The amnesia at the basis of the sudden assertion of a European 'tradition' of anti-homophobic and anti-sexist 'core values' is less a reflection of progressive gender relations than of regressive race relations. We will point to parallels in the German 'integration' debate around the recent Immigration Act (*Zuwanderungsgesetz*), the so-called honour killing of Harun Sürtücü and the new 'Muslim Test' in the nationality law. We critically examine the central role of individual migrant² women like Seyran Ates and Necla Kelek in these German debates, who are constructed as the notable exception which confirms the rule of a victimised Oriental femininity. Irshad Manji, the lesbian journalist from Canada, is a further 'exceptional Muslim'. Her popularity in Britain and Germany further underlines the transnational nature of these white processes of identification. In this article, we argue that neither figure – that of the notable exception and that of the faceless victim without agency – makes sense outside its imperialist context.³

The article began as a series of open letters by two of us about the growing

2 The concept 'migrant' has its origin in anti-racist activism in Germany and includes people of Turkish, North African, Southern European and other ethnicised origins, including German-born people of the second and subsequent generations of migration.

3 Our choice of Britain and Germany stems in part from our biographies. Like many migrants

conservatism of the white gay leadership, circulated to queer and feminist forums in late 2005 and early 2006.⁴ Our hope of finding allies and building anti-racist sexual coalitions was largely disappointed. Two years later, while making our last revisions, the issue of sexual and multicultural rights is at the brink of academic recognition. While we welcome any challenges to sexuality discourse in the 'war on terror', our epistemic communities need to keep asking difficult questions in the spirit of this volume. How do the new theories reinscribe or challenge the single-issue politics at the root of this problem, where sexual agency (and theory) remains white and cultural agency heterosexual? How do they contest or reinforce a construct of 'Eastern culture' as homophobic (and therefore open to official control and of re-colonisation by the 'liberated West')? Does their archive remain white, or do they acknowledge its theoretical and political predecessors in queer Muslims and other queers of colour? As we shall demonstrate, an effective intervention into the ways in which sexual rights and migrant rights have become constructed as mutually contradictory requires a critical historiography, which questions how white subjects came to claim the right to define and theorise sexual liberation projects in the first place.

and people with biographical backgrounds and links to Germany, Jin and Esra migrated to Britain in the search of a better place (Jin is still living here now). Tamsila has visited Germany and has 'queer-extended' family links with people 'originating' there. The two contexts are interesting in that they are often presented as opposing paradigms of race relations, with differing histories of colonialism, genocide, and migration (Piper 1998). Britain has traditionally been viewed as the more liberal regime, with its (now defunct) *ius soli* (law of the soil) model of citizenship and its (now embattled) stark multiculturalism. This contrasting view is contradicted by the findings presented in this article, which point to the growing convergence and intertextuality of violent Orientalisms throughout Europe and the self-identified 'West'.

4 The second birth place of this article, Esra's and Jin's *Intersections* classrooms at Hamburg University and Humboldt University Berlin (January and February 2006), has been more fruitful. We would like thank our students, as well as Jennifer Perzen, the organisers and participants at the *Out of Place* conference, the *Religionen* panel at the Left Book Days in Berlin, Liz Fekete, *Next Generation*, and the fellow activists from the *Queer & Ethnicity* Conference (Qekon) (Spring 2002), the *Queer & Ethnicity* space at *Queeruptation* Berlin (Summer 2002), and the *Blackfix* sex radical queer of colour list (Summer 2007), for various moments of collaboration, inspiration and encouragement.

The Conditions of Queer-of-Colour Representation in Britain

In the British gay and lesbian mainstream, people of colour were traditionally treated as the heterosexual competitors for public resources and recognition. In contrast to some feminists, most white gays did not identify as part of a subculture whose internal heterogeneity required justification. Rather, they located questions of power and justice firmly *outside* their community.

In this model people of colour long existed only as perpetrators of homophobia. For example, the free community news magazine *Pink Paper* very visibly featured Black homophobic individuals or groups such as Robert Mugabe or Nation of Islam (see covers of issues 698, 10 August 2001, and 734, 26 April 2002). This contrasted with the invisibility of Black gays, who simply did not exist in this frame.

Where people of colour were represented as (again heterosexual) victims of oppression, we were depicted as privileged. Statements such as 'You could never say such a thing about a black person' were common in the *Pink*. The invention of the state-protected Black subject allows white gays and lesbians to fantasise themselves as innocent and marginalised – not only by the state but also and especially by Black people themselves. This invites a repression of white gay violence towards queers of colour, and naturalises our dislocation from gay space. The narcissism of this definition of oppression became palpable in April 1999, during the nail bomb attacks by the fascist David Copeland. Many white gays and lesbians seemed almost triumphant when Copeland, after attacking the black area Brixton and the South-Asian Brick Lane, chose gay Soho as his third target.

Needless to say, queers of colour already looked back on a history of self-organisation at that time. Black and Asian sexual culture flourished during the 1980s under the left-wing Greater London Council (Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). However, this era left few traces on the *Pink*, which remained firmly in white hands. In the official gay history, queers of colour simply did not exist.

The year 2001 appeared to change this dramatically. Even before the attacks on New York, Islam had emerged as the new national and global enemy. Since gender and sexuality are the new yardsticks for democracy, white gays claimed a central role in this 'war on terror'. In the 'liberation' of Muslim gays, they delivered the ideological justification for the 'civilising' mission.

Ironically, given the whiteness as well as masculinity of the magazine, it was the blown-up face of a woman in a burqa who adorned the *Pink* issue on the military invasion of Afghanistan ('Blood and Sand', 5 October, 2001). The young, tan face, its large brown eyes cast upwards at the camera, clearly followed Orientalist scripts (Yegenoglu 1998). A Muslim woman, presumably heterosexual and hence victimised, was the perfect symbol for the new-found prowess of white gay masculinity (Petzen 2005).

The new gay masculinity was also empowered by the lifting of the ban on homosexuality. Three issues after 'Blood and Sand', another young, attractive face was featured on the cover of the *Pink* ('Ready for War', 26 October 2001). This time it was a white man with dreamy blue eyes, framed by camouflage clothing and some leaves and twigs. The pin-up style gaze of the model, who was also depicted crawling through bushes in the inside of the magazine, was evocative of gay porn catering to military fetishes. The aesthetic appeal and near symmetry of these two images, of the 'Muslim' woman and the gay 'soldier', illustrates the distinct sexual timbre of the gay participation in the war (see Kuntsman 2008).⁵ This participation was celebrated as a multiple human rights victory: the liberation of gays in Britain, which in turn enabled the liberation of faceless Muslim gays in the countries of occupation.

Independently of this, Muslim gays had already begun to organise themselves. Encouraged by its American predecessor, *Al Fatiha UK* was founded in 1998 and later (in 2002) re-named *Imaan*. In 2001, Tamsila Tauqir co-founded the *Safra Project* for Muslim lesbians, bisexual women and trans people. These developments were overlooked at first by dominant organs who seemed less interested in 'oppressed gay Muslims' now that they were speaking for themselves. The editors of the *Pink* mostly ignored the numerous readers' letters submitted by gay Muslims and their allies, who were protesting the gay participation in the Islamophobic project.

Then, however, interview requests multiplied, not only from the gay but also the mainstream press. We argue that this does not constitute a real break with the traditional marginalisation of gay Muslims. Rather, political events,

⁵ The performance of military masculinity can in this post-ban context also be interpreted as a shift from a subversive to a loyal repetition (see Haritaworn 2008).

