

Online Film Screening “A Jihad for Love”

Interview with Director Parvez Sharma

19 January 2022

Co-hosted by

The Arab Culture Lab at Keio University

JSPS Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) Humanistic and Cross-Disciplinary Research of
the Relationship between Humans and their "Homelands" in the Transnational Era

On 19 January 2022, an online screening of *A Jihad for Love* was organized in collaboration with the Arab Culture Lab and the Watan Research Project. The film is a documentary focusing on gay and lesbian Muslims around the world. The Arab Culture Lab, which studies Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and cultures at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus (SFC), was responsible for translating the subtitles and organizing the screening, and also gave a presentation on Islam and sexual minorities on the day. As for the subtitles, we appreciate the cooperation by the Islamic Film Festival. This film provided us the opportunity to reflect on various issues such as gender issues in Muslim societies, human rights for sexual minorities, and the conflict between Islamic traditions and modern interpretations of Islam, through the images of people who practice "jihad" in their respective places and those who had to leave their homelands in order to maintain both faith and love. After the screening of the film, Director Parvez Sharma, a gay Muslim himself, joined us online from New York to answer questions in English that we had prepared beforehand and more from the audience. We would like to thank all those who took part in the lively discussion.

Kaoru Yamamoto (Keio University Faculty of Policy Management)

Parvez Sharma [Director]

Parvez Sharma is a gay Muslim filmmaker born and raised in India. He worked as a broadcast journalist in the Star News Channel/NDTV, and as a producer and/or editor for BBC World Television's *Moneywise* and *India Tomorrow*, Central Television (UK), The Discovery Channel (US) and others. In 2005, he was a producer at Democracy Now!



In the nineties, Sharma has been a print journalist and reported on what was the first ever detailing of the lesbian experience within India for a national newspaper. He also, as an activist, set up the first organized LGBTQ effort in the eastern state of West Bengal and has spoken on international panels on issues crucial to LGBTQ communities in a South Asian and Muslim context.

He was involved in filmmaking as the Assistant Director for the award-winning feature, *Dance of the Wind*, produced by Director Rajan Khosa, which won awards at the London, Rotterdam and Nantes Film Festivals, and he produced, edited and did additional camera for the DVD of Peter Friedman's Sundance Grand Jury Award winning film *Silverlake Life*.

(biography excerpted from [the press kit of the film](#))

A JIHAD FOR LOVE

The film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2007. The film, transcending national borders and languages - English, Turkish, Persian, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Arabic and French, will move you with its multiple stories which exist where Islam and homosexuality intersects. Although there is no direct prohibition of homosexuality in the Quran, homosexuality has long been considered a "sin" based on the story of the people of Lot (Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament) in the Quran. The film shows characters who repeatedly struggle with the idea of being in love with the same sex but not wanting to be abandoned by God, and shines a light on "those who chose to live as a gay or a lesbian while believing in Islam" in order to come to terms with their religion and sexuality and to keep hope for the future.

The film begins with a scene of an Islamic scholar Muhsin Hendriks performing his morning prayers in South Africa. The film shows him professing his gayness and his Muslim identity through various media, as well as his courageous work as an Imam.

The following scenes capture the struggles and new life in France of Mazen, a young man who exiled to France after being convicted in the Cairo52 case, a mass arrest of homosexuals in Egypt.

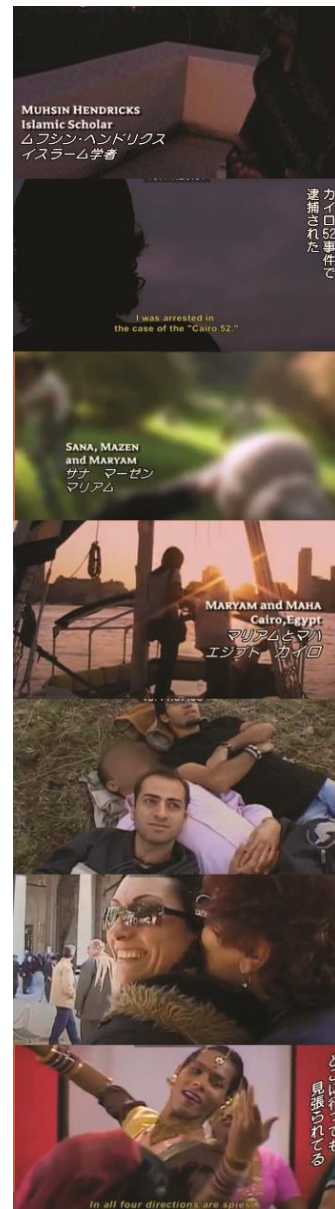
The scene changes from Mazen's new life to the life story of Sana, an immigrant living in France, and then to the scene of Sana, Mariam and Mazen discussing homosexuality and Islam in a park.

Focusing on Mariam, one of the characters in the discussion in the park, the film captures the current situation in Cairo where Mariam and Maha are attracted to each other but the conflict between religion and sexuality poses difficulties for them.

The film changes the focus to Iranian Amir. While he misses Iran and his mother, he decides to seek asylum in Canada, leaving the country where homosexuality is severely punished. He travels to Turkey to apply for refugee status and joins other Iranian gay Muslims, Arsham, Payam, and Mojtaba.

After scenes of four Iranians attempting to defect, the scene shifts to Istanbul, Turkey, where we see a lesbian couple, Ferda, a follower of Sufism, and her lover Kiyemet.

The scene shifts to South Asia. In India, the world's third most populous Muslim country, we see the world of transgender people dressing as women, along with the stories of gay men Qasim and Ahsan.



Official Website <http://ajihadforlove.org/press.html>

Director Parvez Sharma

Interviewer: Hinako Takei (Keio University, Faculty of Environment and Information Studies)

Are there any groups of LGBTQ people in the Muslim community? How can they get information about the way to live life more comfortably, meaning probably – are there any sources out there where they can reach out to balance out both their religion and their sexuality?

Well, we are talking about more than a billion people, and we are talking about Muslims that live in every corner of the world in many different countries in very different circumstances. As you saw in the film “A Jihad for Love,” the circumstances of Ferda and Kiyemet in Istanbul, Turkey are very different than the circumstances of Mazen in Egypt who has to leave prison. He has to escape prison while he is on bail to come to France because he has been imprisoned for his homosexuality. Then, there is the gay *imam* in South Africa, Muhsin Hendricks, who is operating in a climate which is relatively open and open-minded because it is South Africa. So, while groups exist, it is often hard to find them, though I say that in these days of social media, it is becoming easier and easier, and a lot of people are able to connect with each other as you would expect in the 21st century.

It has been about 15 years since the film was made. Any progress or change in the community?

Well, as far as changes in the community, I do not like using the singular word “community” to describe Muslims because they are, as I said, more than a billion on this planet and they are the world’s fastest growing religion, so you cannot call them one community. They are very different from each other, so the situation on the ground in ISIS-controlled Syria is very different from the situation on the ground for gay Muslims in India who are living under a penal code that now says that homosexuality is okay. In the last four or five years, this has happened. So, it depends again, and I repeat this. It depends on where you are in the Muslim world and what kind of circumstances you are encountering.

What do you think about the idea that in the West, there is an over-focus on human rights, and that even the rights to express and exercise one’s sexuality is also a Western concept that focuses on individual rights instead of collective good?

That is an interesting question. You could make an argument that Western movements for LGBTQ freedom are modeled in a way that is uniquely Western alone and that cannot be transmitted easily into many, many different Islamic settings. So, there is a kind of arrogance in

the West that gay people living in Muslim countries will adopt the same labels of freedom, of justice, of being queer, of having the rainbow flag, of marching down a big avenue in a city to have a pride march, but these are unrealistic expectations. I do not think that Muslims in Muslim countries will be doing that.

In the movie, it seems that the subjects had good relationships with their mothers. However, how were their relationships with their fathers? Is there any difference between how mothers see their kids who are Muslim and gay versus how fathers see their kids being Muslim and gay?

I think so. I think this is a question of commonality across all geographies. I would say that mothers being mothers in any culture reach a level of acceptance first, and it is very often possible that the father figure in the relationship is not going to accept the homosexuality of the child. It just so happens that while making “A Jihad for Love,” I did not plan for it deliberately, but the people who made it to the final cut of the film all ended up having strong relationships with their mothers and not very strong or even present relationships with their fathers, so they never spoke about them.

Despite the divide, what are ways in which Muslims can create a safe space for gay and lesbian Muslims within their communities, or do you think that this is not possible unless homosexuality is considered legal?

Islam changes depending on where it is. It is a uniquely malleable religion. It is flexible in terms of the degree to which it will be implemented. For example, the situation in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia is not going to be the same as the situation in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia where you could get beheaded for the “sin” of homosexuality. So, it depends on where you are. Muslims forming groups who self-identify as gay or any of the other labels that we use in the West is something that happens of course. We are living in the age of Instagram and artificial intelligence, so of course that happens, and people can connect in ways that we did not even imagine possible before, but I do not think that it is the norm. I do not think that it is common in Islamic cultures to talk about sexuality in general in very open ways. Forget talking about homosexuality.

Do you personally know any groups or communities where they help lesbian or gay Muslims out there who are struggling with their sexuality and their religion?

The website of the film which is “ajihadforlove.org” has got an entire page of resources that list out organizations across the planet that can be of help to gay Muslims.

Please tell us about the situations for bisexual Muslims, as it was not mentioned in the film.

It is not mentioned in the film not because of any deliberate intent. It was not mentioned in the film because I did not end up filming anyone who was bisexual and Muslim, so it was not a deliberate oversight on my part. That said, it might be easier for people who are bisexual to get into cover-up heterosexual marriages while still being able to exercise their sexual preference in private.

Do you think that the criminalization of homosexual acts is possible? Because it says in Islamic law that you need four witnesses to prove?

It is a very interesting question. It comes down to the theoretical interpretation and the theological interpretation of Sharia law. It is not very often that a Sharia court will try someone for the sin of homosexuality. It happens and it happens regularly, but not on a daily basis only because of the stipulation in Sunni Islam that four witnesses should be present to the sexual act taking place, which as you can imagine is not normally the situation. So, I would say that it makes it harder to criminalize and penalize gay people if you follow the letter of the law, but I think that religious authorities in regimes like Iran or Saudi Arabia where there is Sharia law, be it Shia or Sunni, have no problems punishing people who are gay without needing to prove the four-witness rule.

Is there a time in Islamic history that societal attitudes were lenient toward homosexuality?

That is a very good question. Islamic history is full of examples of society, especially the arts and culture, celebrating homosexuality, so they were not only tolerating homosexuality, but they were also celebrating homosexuality. In poetry, for example, the poet, Abu Nuwas, in what is present-day Iraq, wrote very risqué poetry that had homosexual content in the Arabic language, and this was widely disseminated in the region. I would say that traditionally the attitude used to be that the Orient or the East or Islamic cultures, for example, were decadent and sexually permissive compared to cultures in Western, Christian societies which tended to historically judge Islamic culture therefore as being too open toward sexual minorities like gay people.

Are there alternative interpretations apart from the one that was mentioned in the film about it being male-male rape, not consenting sex, that have served as a basis that there is space for homosexuality in Islam?

Yes, there are alternative interpretations, but once again it comes down to parsing, as we say in English. The passages in the Quran, the theological heft of the material is dealt with in terms of taking portions of language and saying that the intent was not to say that homosexuality is wrong or forbidden. We can do that, but I am pessimistic that anyone is going to end up with as positive

an outlook as the South African *imam* in the film who ends up with sort of saying that homosexuality is acceptable in Islam. I do not think that those kinds of opinions will be common. So, in a sense I disagree with my own film a little bit.

Could I ask? This is from me, but if you could change anything about your film, as you just mentioned that you disagree with your film, how would you change or how would you document?

I would not end with the gay *imam* in South Africa that *ijitihad* or open discourse is the solution to the “problem” of homosexuality. I would not end with that because I think that is a cop-out, and that is an easy answer.

If you know anything about it, please let us know how daughters or sons feel about having their parents as gay and Muslim.

As far as the film is concerned and the example of South Africa again, the *imam* who has three children, from a young age they have been exposed to his homosexuality and have known about it, so they tend to be very accepting and supporting of their father.

How do you define “acceptance,” because in the film, there was a scene where one of the child was joking about her father’s homosexuality by saying “If they find gay people, they are going to be stone to death.” In that context, do you see that as acceptance?

Yes, they were children at that age when I had filmed them. The exact quote that the eldest daughter says is “I wish that when they stone you to death that they kill you with the first stone and you do not have to suffer any pain.” That is a very sort of emotional and important moment in the film because you realize that this little child has internalized the teaching Islamic to such a large extent that she would say something like that to her own father and that she can imagine the violent death of her father because of his homosexuality. All of those three children grew up with that. What I am saying is that in the present, because they grew up with their father’s homosexuality, they are very supportive of their father’s homosexuality.

What was the reaction when people watched this film? Did you receive any cancels or critics, or did you ever have any blackmail through this movie?

Yes, of course, as was expected. “A Jihad for Love” – now, at this point, we would think more than about eight or nine million people across the world have seen the film because it has been on television and in cinemas in practically every country, and every major country over the years in film festivals. Based on those TRPs, we have been able to calculate that the numbers have been

very large, but every time the film has been exhibited in a space that is controversial – for example, I go back to Malaysia because it is in the region. In Kuala Lumpur, when it was shown, there were people who protested it. Over the years, I personally have received a lot of hate mail and death threats and so on and so forth from within the Muslim community or just homophobic communities in general. I have also been the recipient of *fatwas* or religious opinions that condemned me for homosexuality, but no one has carried out any punishment as a result of those *fatwas* and, as you can see, I am alive.

What is your opinion about the usage of the term “LGBTQ” or “homosexuality” toward Muslim sexual minorities?

I was saying that it cannot be homogenized because Muslims speak in so many different languages. “A Jihad for Love” itself, the film, speaks in eight to nine different languages, and a lot of these languages do not have labels of affirmation like “lesbian” or “gay” or “bisexual” or “transgender” in them to describe the condition, if you will, of being homosexual. So, I do not think that the idea of labeling everything easily as “LGBT” will ever be translated successfully into other cultures because other cultures will have to really come up with their own definitions based on language and based on geography and based on the norms of the place itself

Is the fact that same-sex couples cannot procreate biologically the big factor for the basis of a homosexual being considered a criminal?

Yes, it is. That is a very good question. I think that in all religions, and this includes Christianity as well, all religions have a problem with homosexuality because there is the idea of the true, rightful conception of a child coming out of a heterosexual marriage, and that is what society expects you to do, and therefore anything else is completely stigmatized.

What made you decide to shoot this film in various countries and not only in one country?

Because it was very important for me to show the diversity of Islam. 9/11 had just happened. Osama Bin Laden and George Bush in those years seemed to be the spokespersons for Islam. I did not want that to happen. The only way to show that Islam does not have a single spokesperson was to show that there is not one kind of Muslim.

It seems that even though in the Quran there are descriptions about male-male homosexual acts and there are poems and stories about it, there are no expressions of homosexuality of women. Are there any of them in Islamic historic works?

I would say in the arts, in poetry, in culture, there are references and allusions to homoerotic love between women, but traditionally with a culture that is male-dominant, which is what Islamic society ended to be, the sexual agency given to them is very limited in the first place. So, it is not very often that the sexualities of women are self-actualized.

I guess this might be our last question. How do you advise young Muslims out there who struggle with their sexuality?

First, they should see “A Jihad for Love.” I laugh, but I also say it kind of half-seriously because it remains amazing to me that to this day, people respond so much and so positively to this film across the world. I mean there is no reason for us to be having this discussion 15 years after the film was made, but yet here we are and the film is very much alive, and a discussion is being had and a debate is being had. So, I think that watching films like this, knowing that they are not alone and that there are others that have come before them and there are others that will come after them will be of tremendous help to young, gay and lesbian Muslims. Now with AI, now with social media, and now with the fact that we are living in 2022, I think things are going to get easier.

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