

Affective entanglements with the sexual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an

Mahdi Tourage

2020-09-01

Contents

Abstract	3
Sensual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an	5
Commentaries and the discourse of power	6
The discourse of power and the production of affects	8
Fantasy and reality	10
Mediating the spiritual and the sensual	13
About the author	16
Acknowledgments	16
References	16

Abstract

This paper examines affective structures and power formations that are constructed, maintained or contested when the significance of the sexual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an is divided into sensual and spiritual. I take a fictional story by Mohja Kahf as an example of a Qur'an commentary that centres gendered and embodied experiences in the text, and contrast it with Muhammad Abdel Haleem's commentary, who views the sexual rewards of paradise as allegorical. Using affect theory, I will argue that allegorical interpretations limit the affective efficacy of the sensuality of the text to their symbolic function, associating spirituality with a disembodied, hence transcendent masculinity. Kahf's exegesis, however, shows that affect and meaning are not pre-given, but produced in interaction with the text. I will conclude that configuring the text as sensual or spiritual is not due to any intrinsic or predetermined content, but a product of power relations.

Keywords: Islam; Quran; Sexuality; paradise affect theory

Affiliation

King's University College Ontario, Canada. email: mtourage@uwo.ca

The Qur'an's descriptions of paradise, which include sexual imagery, have been elaborated in commentaries, numerous books of hadith, as well as theological and mystical treatises (Kinberg 2001–6:4.12–20). The significance of the rewards of paradise is generally divided into two main categories, the 'sensual' and the 'spiritual' (Kinberg 2001–6:4.17). This article is not a survey of the vast secondary literature on the Qur'anic vision of paradise and its rewards. My goal is to examine what affective structures and power formations are constructed, maintained or contested when the significance of the text is divided into sensual and spiritual. As an example of a commentary that centers sensuality, I have chosen Mohja Kahf's fictional story, 'Lustrous companions: "Do we get dick in heaven?"' (Kahf 2007:16–19). Kahf's piece is unlike any traditional Qur'anic exegesis that consistently and deliberately omits women's ideas and experiences (Ali 2013:73). Taking her work as a commentary on the Qur'an and as a valid mode of production of knowledge is to expand the established parameters of Qur'anic exegesis. The significance of this mode of production of scriptural knowledge and praxis can be gauged by its opposite: repeated appeals by male scholars and community leaders for normative 'Islamic traditional interpretations' (Hammer 2012:50). According to the normative standards of Islamic traditional interpretations, Kahf's column lacks the pedagogical nuances and the demonstrable linguistic skills necessary to be considered a proper commentary on the Qur'an. Her work is a 'deviation' from the patriarchal near monopoly of traditional interpretations over the affect and meaning of the text. Yet Kahf locates herself and her work unambiguously within the proscriptive bounds of Islam (Davis, Zine and Taylor 2007:383–8; Mattawa 2008). As a result, she is 'in a double bind,' so to speak (Hammer 2008:453). On the one hand, her work can be easily dismissed as having no scholarly value by those who have traditional Islamic training. On the other hand, her work can be dismissed for being faith-based

by some strands of feminism who accept nothing short of ostensibly emancipatory acts of resistance.¹

By way of contrast, I will also discuss a typical commentary on the sexual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an by Muhammad Abdel Haleem, a contemporary scholar of the Qur'an (Abdel Haleem 1999). Abdel Haleem's commentary repeats a 'spiritual' reading of the sexual imagery of the Qur'anic paradise, viewing the rewards of paradise as primarily symbolic and allegorical. He repeatedly asserts that much of what has been written on this and other subjects by Muslims and non-Muslims involves misinterpretation and mistranslation.

I will be using affect theory to examine the process of production of affect in the text in interaction with its gendered and embodied addressees. Definitions of affect usually connect it with concepts such as 'bodies' and 'forces.' One broad definition offered by Bailey and DiGangi defines affect as 'a general capacity of bodies as they interact with the other bodies in their environment' (Bailey and DiGangi 2017). Although affect has some connection with emotions, equating the two is too reductive for an exploration of the complexities of the text. The strength of affect theory is in its potential to go beyond the nuances of emotions (which are subjective and contingent upon one's awareness and ability to process and claim them). Affect theory extends the inquiry into the terms of exchange between the affective structure of the text and what lies outside it. I will argue that Kahf's gendered and embodied commentary underscores the contingent nature of the affects elicited by the sexual imagery found in the descriptions of the rewards of paradise. She shows that affect – like meaning – produced in interaction with the text is not bound by any particular regime of interpretation; neither affects nor meanings are pre-given, they are mediated. Every reading of scripture is a product, and producer, of contextual and relational encounters between a volatile text in interaction with bodies that are equally unstable in their gendered, sexed, desired and desiring configurations. Therefore, something of the significance of the text always insists in these encounters and interactions, but affective entanglements are irreducible to the matrix of their textuality.

I will conclude that contrary to the polysemic nature of a scripture like the Qur'an, spiritualized symbolic interpretations effectively impose limits on the range of affective possibilities that the text could yield. More importantly, limiting the affective efficacy of the sensuality (materiality) of the text to their allegorical function establishes a hierarchy of the material and spiritual in ways that associate spirituality with a disembodied, hence transcendent and superior masculinity. Therefore, privileging the affective efficacy of spirituality is about a discourse of patriarchal power that marks sensuality in the text as derivative, unruly, earthly, and hence inferior to pristine spirituality. I will conclude that configuring the text as sensual or spiritual is not due to any intrinsic or predetermined content, but a product of power relations. My goal in this

¹ For example, Darlene Juschka sees little value in faith-based scholarship by women (2001:ix-x); quoted in Hammer (2008:453).

article is to shed light on these relations of power that are both products and producers of affective entanglements with the text and the conditions of their possibilities.

Sensual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an

Islamic tradition disassociates sexuality from reproduction, paving the way for sexual fulfillment and pleasure for both men and women (within the confines of marriage) as natural and desirable (Ali 2006:6, 8; Shaikh 2003:105–28). The Qur'anic paradise is quite different from the Jewish and Christian paradise. In Angelika Neuwirth's opinion its realistic deallegorized sexual imagery is more in line with its 'pagan' predecessors than its textual precursors found in the broader paradisaal imaginations of late antiquity (Neuwirth 2017:84–5). The Qur'an describes paradise as 'an eternal physical abode,' where the righteous are rewarded for their worldly good deeds. Several passages of the Qur'an include the sensual pleasures of paradise that promise purified spouses to the righteous, along with gardens of fruits in which rivers of purified water, wine, milk and honey flow (47:15). The inhabitants of paradise are seen reclining on green cushions and beautiful fine carpets (55:76). They are seated on lined-up thrones, calling for abundant fruit and drink. They will be married to devout women of modest gaze and equal age (78:33). The wives of the righteous men in paradise will be purified women (2:25; 3:15; 4:57). This indicates that both righteous men and women enter paradise, but 'women's fate in afterlife is associated with that of their husband (3:55–6; 37:22; 43:70)' (Roded 2001–6:2.524). As Neuwirth observes, paradise is decidedly a 'gendered space' (Neuwirth 2017:83). The righteous are kept in reserved pavilions. Believing women are created anew and made virgins. Circulating around the righteous in paradise will be young boys of eternal youth, serving them from a flowing spring with vessels and pitchers and cups. Who these boys are or why their labor is needed is not explained in the text. Nerina Rustomji writes that according to exegetical literature they are unlike the earthly servants and slaves, 'they are purified in substance and in purpose ... the servants are beings, objects, and also mechanisms that allow for the inhabitants' pleasures' (Rustomji 2019:299). The earthly wives of the male believers will also be present in paradise (Qur'an 13:23; 36:56). However, textual reference to their companionship may be related to the later history of Qur'anic revelation where, after the establishment of a community in Medina, Muslim women played a greater role, hence necessitating 'an adjustment' to the gendered social image of paradise (Neuwirth 2017:83).

The *houris* as good and comely maidens are assigned to be male believers' sexual partners; they are promised 'to a privileged male elect' (Neuwirth 2017:83). Earlier Meccan revelations speak of the 'wide-eyed damsels' (*houris*) who are awaiting to be wed to the righteous males (44:54; 52:20; 56:22). The text gives some description of the bodies of these amorous virgin maidens. They are equal in age (78:33), have 'swelling breasts,' and are virgins, 'still not deflowered, neither by man nor jinn' (44:54; 52:20;

55:56; 55:72; 56:22). They are like hidden pearls (56:33), or hidden eggs (37:49; or ‘excessively white,’ as different translations read). In his entry ‘Eyes’ in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, Frederick Denny writes:

@@@The term *hūr*, pl. of *hawrāʾ*, refers to whiteness as in the large eye of the gazelle. The heavenly houris possess the ideal of feminine beauty with large, lustrous eyes that charm through a juxtaposition of white background – comprised of the eyeball and skin – and black pupil, lashes and eyebrows. The houri’s eye is not deployed so much for seeing as for being seen and enjoyed as a sign of affection, delight and bidding to blissful union. (Denny 2001–6:2.153–4) ~

Commentaries and the discourse of power

A survey of primary and secondary commentaries on the Qur’anic paradise shows that the pleasures of paradise are considered to be a compensation for the deeds of the righteous (Kinberg 2001–6:12). These commentaries generally divide the pleasures of paradise into two types, sensual and spiritual. The spiritual pleasures include God’s pleasure, forgiveness, protection, or rejoicing in the bounty of God (Kinberg 2001–6:17). The spiritual pleasures are held in higher esteem and take precedent over the sensual delights of paradise. Abdel Haleem asserts that the significance of the physical pleasures of paradise have been exaggerated. He puts the reward of paradise in ‘proper perspective’ by arguing that despite all the sensual description of these physical rewards, the inhabitants of paradise are never ‘seen to indulge in sensual pleasure’ (Abdel Haleem 1999:97). There is no explicit mention of sexual activity, eating or drinking taking place. This leads Abdel Haleem to conclude that material rewards, which are outnumbered in the text by spiritual rewards, are rather symbolic and offered as a token of honor to the righteous (Abdel Haleem 1999:97). This symbolic reading of the text is supported by some verses of the Qur’an where, for example, the satisfaction from God is presented as ‘greater’ than other pleasures such as gardens with flowing rivers and pleasant dwellings (Qur’an 9:72). However, as some scholars have shown, ‘It is impossible to find any classical Muslim exegete who understood the verses concerning the houris as anything other than references to women whose purpose was to provide sexual pleasure for the blessed in heaven’ (Cook 2007:33). For example, some Muslim commentators maintained that the righteous men of paradise ‘will be busy’ with deflowering the virgins, a reference to Qur’an 36:55 that states: ‘Indeed the companions of paradise, that day, will be joyfully occupied’ (Ahmed 2017:831). Aversion to considering the joys of paradise as carnal pleasures is therefore a modern phenomenon influenced by nineteenth century European Puritanism. For example, Khaled ElRouayheb has explored the influence of European Victorian mores on the new, modern-educated Arab elite’s attitudes towards sexuality. He argues that the erosion of the prevalent tolerance of passionate love of boys in the Arab world was partly due to the influence of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Victo-

rian attitudes (El-Rouayheb 2005:156). Similarly, Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown that in the context of modern Iran, categorizing homosexuality as sexual deviancy by both secular modernists and Islamists was ‘more akin to late nineteenth-century western European concepts than to anything from Islam’s own classical heritage’ (Najmabadi 2005:57). Pre-modern Muslim writings ‘were by and large free of sexual inhibitions’ (Al-Azmeh 1995:216). Aziz Al-Azmeh, noting that carnality of paradisaic pleasures is neither anomalous nor peculiar, writes: ‘It is not surprising that one lexicographer compiled a dictionary of sexual terms in which 1083 verbal forms of coitus were listed.’ (Al-Azmeh 1995:216–17).

Abdel Haleem’s assertions that the material rewards of paradise are symbolic are echoed differently in a satirical fictional piece by Mohja Kahf, a scholar of comparative and modern Arab literature. In her fictional column entitled ‘Lustrous companions: “Do we get dick in heaven?”’, she writes about a ladies’ Qur’an study circle in a mosque in the United States. ‘We are doing “The Merciful,” the chapter of the Qur’an where all the sexy virgin babes are promised to men in paradise.’ Her young friend, Maryam, asks her: ‘Men get pussy. Do we get dick?’ Maryam goes on to ask the visiting Egyptian male imam: ‘Do women get to have sex in paradise too?’ (Kahf 2007:16) The imam becomes very uncomfortable and, speaking through a mortified male interpreter, answers: ‘Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise’ (Kahf 2007:16). The imam’s and Abdel Haleem’s positions are identical with another contemporary example that expresses the official line of commentaries viewing the sensual pleasures of paradise as symbolic. In *The Study Quran*, we read:

@@@The sexual joys of Paradise ... are not sublimated form of the joys of earthly sexuality, but symbolize spiritual union. What one experiences here below is a mere reflection of paradisaic joy, but allusion cannot be made to it except by using the language of earthly sexual union, since it is the most intense form of pristine sensual pleasure known in this world. (Nasr *et al.* 2015:1089) ~

It is instructive to contrast Kahf’s exegesis with the symbolic official readings of the text as offered by Abdel Haleem and others. Her piece makes explicit what is implicit in the official symbolic readings, namely, the sensuality of this imagery. It is the sensuality of the text that sustains its symbolic readings. The pain that the apologist commentators go through to defend the symbolic status of these verses is a sign of what is at stake in privileging the spiritual over the sensual nature of rewards in paradise. The sensual/spiritual binary that is established as ‘the official’ reading of the text is no different than what anthropologists identify as the nature/culture discourse. Nature is prefigured as feminine and untamed, hence inferior, in need of control and open to domination by culture, which is assumed to be masculine and the active force for cultivation and discipline, and therefore superior (Butler 1990:50). The commentaries that prioritize the symbolic value of these verses can be located along the patriarchal continuum of official commentaries.² They condition affective encounters

² For a discussion of these patriarchal commentaries, see Mahdi Tourage (2012:1–25).

with the text in reductive ways, rendering their sensuality as secondary, appreciated only as mere allegories of paradisaal joy. This way, patriarchal readings of the text deny the affective efficacy of the sensual (synonymous with material and bodily). Therefore, what is at stake in establishing a hierarchy of dichotomized sensuality/spirituality when encountering the text is the question of power.

The discourse of power and the production of affects

The discourse of power constituting what is 'sensual' then goes on to designate affects produced by it as derivative, unruly and earthly, hence inferior to its binary opposite marked as spiritual and pristine. In other words, the sexual imageries of paradise in the text lack intrinsic significance, no affect resides in them outside or prior to the context in which they are deployed. As Bryan Massumi notes, 'We're in affect, affect is not in us. It's not a subjective content of our human lives. It's the quality of a relational field ...' (Massumi 2015:124). To the extent that the affective significance of bodies in the sexual imagery of paradise is textually produced and culturally determined we can speak of them as textual bodies. However, being 'textual' does not preclude materiality and the lived experiences of bodies, nor does it bracket the interest of normative discourse in defining and disciplining physical bodies. Affective encounters with the text conform to relations of power along the contours of, for example, gender, sex, class and race, boundaries which must be drawn and policed. 'Affects, in this sense, pose questions about the links between the subjective and cultural, individual and social, self and other, inside and outside' (Koivunen 2001). Differentiating the sensuality of these verses from their spiritual significance is indissociable from the regulatory maneuvering of power that governs their materialization. This is particularly true in the case of the sexualized bodies and organs that are noted in Kahf's commentary.

Whereas symbolic interpretations of the text insist that the rewards of paradise are irreducible to their sensuality, Kahf's commentary demonstrates that the sensuality of paradisaal rewards is inseparable from their materiality. In Kahf's interpretation, paradisaal bodies are gendered and sexed; they have margins and orifices, have desire and are desired in ways that are not disciplined and controlled by this worldly force. If bodies awaiting the believers in paradise have swelling breasts and wide eyes that are for being seen and enjoyed, why wouldn't they have, in Kahf's words, 'pussies' and 'dicks' that would be for pleasure? Kahf's strategy of 're-organizing' bodies in paradise indicates that neither the bodies and their organs, nor the affective interactions with varying interpretations of their textual representations are private matters. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz writes, 'When people relate to the discrete organs of their bodies, they are not just relating to themselves but to the symbols of their culture.' (EilbergSchwartz 1992:12). The flip side of this statement must also be true: those

who sublimate the sexualized bodies of paradise do so in relation to their own physical bodies and discrete organs. It is in this context that we can speak of a phallogentric subtext in the disembodied readings of these sexual imageries. Kahf, therefore, is positing bodies that are textual and material. They are lived entities capable of evoking and receiving affective results, showing that affect is both a product and producer of textual bodies. This is not about simply affirming or negating the material or spiritual categories of paradisaal rewards, but stressing the discursive nature of that negation and affirmation. Sensuality or spirituality are not intrinsic to the text (or to paradise for that matter), nor are the affects produced by them, they are effects of power. In fact, following Judith Butler, we can say they *are* power in their ‘formative constituting effects’ (Butler1993:34).

The official discourse of power that marks the bodies in paradise as sublime has a vested interest in controlling the body of the text as well. In other words, the text too can be conceived as a body with margins and borders through which its interaction with the world is negotiated. ‘The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system,’ writes Mary Douglas (1966:115). Contrary to the polysemic nature of the Qur’an, interpreting the sexual imagery of paradise as signifying only spiritual union imposes epistemological closure on its affective possibilities. In this sense, the sexual imagery of paradise constitutes the borders and liminal zones of the text where sensual/spiritual, high/low culture and inside/outside interact. It is no surprise that these liminal zones are most open to nonstandard interpretive interventions such as the one offered by Kahf. These considerations indicate that margins (and what is banished there) cannot be theorized in isolation from the constructed social, cultural, bodily, semiotic, theological and epistemological borders. To quote Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘The theory of the body is already a theory of perception’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945:235–9). Or as Simone de Beauvoir comments on Merleau-Ponty’s words, the body is simultaneously a material ‘thing of the world and a point of view on this world’ (Beauvoir 2010:24). It bears repeating that all borders are political borders constructed by a certain discourse of power. All margins are designated as such for not conforming to specific coordinates of normative subjectivities, or to use Abdel Haleem’s phrase, for not conforming to ‘proper perspective’ (Abdel Haleem 1999:97). Borders (of text, body, nation, etc.) are like ‘the skin of the community,’ which as Sara Ahmed theorizes, ‘*is an effect of the alignment of the subject with some others and against other others*’ (Ahmed 2012:104; original emphasis).

These considerations point to the significance of Kahf’s exegesis. The dismissals of her blog as non-academic, along with the ‘torrent of attacks’ as well as death threats against her (Al Maleh 2009:30), are not due to overtly sexual themes in her writing – after all, sexually provocative works are not alien to the Muslim literary tradition (see e.g. Bouhdiba 1985). Kahf’s piece is dismissed because it does not submit to the normative relations of power that control the bodily/spiritual binary and neat systems of signification governing the production of Qur’an commentaries. Qur’an commentaries that do not conform to normative power arrangements are dismissed by the ‘ortho-

dox' Muslims and academics alike. Examples are readily available in Muslim women's commentaries, especially those centring on embodied interpretive encounters with the Qur'an.³ Or we can note the case of Elijah Muhammad, who interpreted and taught the Qur'an to his followers for forty-five years but has never been treated as a *mu-fassir* (exegete), or 'even a major figure in Islam by the academic community' (Berg 1998:321). The young Muslim woman in Kahf's fictional story asking whether women get dick in heaven disturbs established power relations by highlighting the sensuality (materiality) of the sexual imagery of paradise. Kahf demonstrates that materialization (like spiritualization) is 'the effect of boundary, fixity and surface' (Butler 1993:9). That is to say, spiritual readings of the text, which assume a separation of the bodily and the spiritual, aim at producing a certain affective economy of exchange with their reader. However, they cannot entirely suppress undesired affects, because attempts at eliminating certain affects result only in their displacements. Kahf's commentary points to a possibility that is suppressed by the commentaries noted above; namely, the possibility of receiving any and all physical-sexual pleasures one desires in paradise. This possibility points to a tension, an antagonism in the very discourse of power itself, which is projected onto the sensual/ spiritual binary as if these two are mutually exclusive disparate categories. The sensuality of these Qur'anic passages is the 'specter' that haunts spiritualized readings. Put differently, the spiritualized readings are 'haunted' by the sensual affects of the text, which will always be there (Ahmed 2012:95).

Fantasy and reality

In psychoanalytical terms the suppressed sensuality of the text is 'the unacknowledgeable "*spectral*," *fantasmatic history* that effectively sustains the explicit symbolic tradition, but has to remain foreclosed if it is to be operative' (Žižek 2000:64; original emphasis). The sensuality of the text must remain suppressed through an unspoken unifying pact that produces a sanitized corpus of the righteous believers in paradise mirroring the 'social body' of believers who only subscribe to this suppression. It is in reference to this function of suppression as an invitation to social cohesion and power that Sara Ahmed writes, 'affects and emotions work to align the subject and community in specific and determinate ways' (Ahmed 2012:104). Articulated differently, Slavoj Žižek asserts, 'One becomes a full member of a community not simply by identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, but only when one also assumes the spectral dimension that sustains this tradition, the undead ghosts that haunt the living, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted "between the lines," through the lacks and distortions of the explicit symbolic tradition' (Žižek 2009).

Suppressing sensuality in the Qur'anic description of paradise is further related to another tension found in the nature of choice offered to the righteous in paradise. We

³ For a prominent example, see Amina Wadud (1999); for a detailed discussion of this issue, see Hammer (2012:56–76).

read in the Qur'an 43:71 that the believers who are granted entry into paradise will be given 'whatever their souls desire.' Therefore, it is not far-fetched to presume that the sexual imagery of paradise as described in the Qur'an includes any and all forms of sexual pleasure as well. The Arabic word *tashtahi-hi* used in this verse is related to the root *sh-h-w*, meaning 'strong longing' and 'desire,' which includes 'carnal lust' as well (Lane 1955–6:1614). However, the choice of any desired sexual gratification is contingent upon the expectation that it would not be exercised. In other words, this is an offer that must be refused. This is the unwritten rule, that the righteous in paradise have the freedom to choose whatever their hearts desire as long as they make the *right* choice. Kahf makes this clear when the imam in her story declares that only those who choose symbolic spiritual gratification will enter paradise. This made-to-be-refused offer points to a kind of exchange that Lacanian psychoanalysis articulates as 'empty gesture,' which is 'willing (choosing freely) what is in any case compulsory, ... pretending (maintaining the appearance) that there is a free choice although effectively there isn't one ... a gesture – an offer – that is meant to be rejected' (Žižek 2007:12). Accepting the made-to-be-refused offer, that is, taking it seriously, is tantamount to a traumatic event. It undermines the pact that upholds the structure of interpreting these verses symbolically. As an example, we can consider Ahmed Ahmed's 'Axis of Evil Comedy Tour' routine, in which he tells a joke about a Muslim terrorist group recruiting young men by promising them seventy-two virgins in paradise (Ahmed 2007). In an attempt to outdo them, another competing terrorist organization promises new recruits seventy-two virgins, plus 'two whores, and a goat!' This joke functions like any good joke would: bypassing our normative cultural censors to bring to our attention that which is commonly known but has remained suppressed. It makes explicit what our collective pact preserves as the disavowed foundation of the spiritualized rewards of paradise.⁴ The dismissal of the signifiatory efficacy of this joke is not due to pointing to the sexual possibilities available to the righteous in paradise or its supposed vulgarity. This joke must be rejected because it breaks the silence about the pact; and without that implicit pact symbolic readings of the text fall apart. The pact must remain tacit if it is to unify its signatories and facilitate the smooth functioning of power to spiritualize.

The discourse of power disguises the tension inherent in its own signifying operations as an antagonism between the sensual and spiritual binaries. But sensual/spiritual are not mutually exclusive readings of the text. To borrow from Michel Foucault, the relation between the two can be described as a relation of 'immanence' in which 'there is no exteriority, even if they have specific roles and are linked together on the basis of their difference' (Foucault 1990:98). In other words, what these two readings of the Qur'an's sexual imagery of paradise have in common is that they are not outside or prior to power. However, they do relate to technologies of power differently. Symbolic

⁴ It benefits us to be reminded that disavowal includes both recognition and denial. See Dylan Evans (1996:43–4).

readings admit only a limited affective significance in the text. They view the sexual imagery of paradise through a ‘representational logic’ where these images function ‘indexically’ as records of future events (Bolter and Grusin 1999:70). The Qur’anic paradise and its symbolic joys are then ontologized as dematerialized and disembodied self-referential formations. They can relate to their material foundations only in ways that the hermeneutical efficacy of their materiality produces stable and predictable affects. To control the affective outcome of encounter with the sensual imagery of paradise, Abdel Haleem suggests that anything other than the ‘proper perspective’ is simply ‘popular conceptions of paradise in the Qur’an (based perhaps on an exaggeration of this physical picture)’ (Abdel Haleem 1999:100). He goes on to vindicate the text of any possible blemishes of sensuality by resorting to simplistic technicalities. He argues:

@@@(i) [T]he inhabitants of *janna* [the garden of paradise] are not seen to indulge in sensual pleasure; (ii) material rewards are seen to be symbolic of honouring; (iii) material rewards are actually outnumbered by moral and spiritual rewards; and (iv) material rewards are also outranked by these non-material ones. (Abdel Haleem 1999:100–1) ~

The tension produced by the very existence of sensual rewards in the text is not addressed. In other words, material rewards are there only to support the privileged position of symbolic readings unless they can outnumber and outrank spiritual rewards – or based on Abdel Haleem’s logic, unless there are eyewitnesses who can see the inhabitants of paradise indulge in sensual pleasures.

In this context, symbolic representations of paradisaal joy can be theorized as ‘fantasy,’ which in its Freudian sense is not an illusory configuration entirely distinguished from or opposed to reality. Neither reality nor fantasy are unproblematic givens that can be apprehended in an objective way; they are both ‘discursively constructed’ (Evans 1996:61). Spiritualized readings of the rewards of paradise are therefore not simply a way of defining their nature. The nature of the rewards of paradise – like the content of fantasy, or the ultimate meaning of the text – remains unknown and irrelevant anyway. What is relevant is the way in which the representation of these rewards simultaneously structures reality while dissimulating such structuration.

Spiritualized commentaries fail to successfully negotiate the affective interplay of fantasy/reality, finding pleasure only in the suppression of the full affective potential of sensual pleasure. This is indicated by their insistence on delimiting interpretive modalities that strip away the full range of epistemological and affective possibilities permitted by the text. An inverted version of this breakdown of accommodating the competing influences of fantasy and reality is found in the example of the so-called Islamic State extremists. The brutality of the Islamic State’s weaponized rape is documented and need not be repeated here (Prendergast 2017). However, without diminishing such brutality and as far as the subject matter of this article is concerned, the Islamic State’s religious justification for satisfying their sexual fantasies in the earthly realm can be partly attributed to their failure to negotiate the fantasy/reality dialectics

in the textual sources of Islamic tradition. For those who espouse spiritualized commentaries, it is reality that finds support in fantasy. That is to say, affects generated by the materiality of earthly sexuality and bodily desires are too traumatic for their neatly constructed hierarchical structure of power that ontologizes heavenly pleasures. To put this in psychoanalytical terms, for those espousing symbolic readings the fantasy of the spiritual rewards of paradise is an escape from the complexities (*horrors*, in psychoanalytical parlance) of the desires and materiality of earthly bodies. The type of horrors invading their fantasy could include the very real possibility that the sexual pleasures of paradise may be far from their imagined compulsory heteronormativity, that these rewards may be as material and complex as they are on earth.

However, for the fighters of the Islamic State reality is black and white. You are either fighting for the Islamic State, for which there are sexual rewards, fulfilling your fantasies here and now; or against the Islamic State, which makes you subject to summary executions, enslavement and rape. They would be disappointed and horrified to confront the concept of the Qur'an's sensual rewards of paradise as being purely symbolic. For them, creating a self-serving brutal reality provides an escape from thoughts of a purely symbolic paradise or an inclusive and loving religion. It is no surprise, then, that they find it 'their holy duty to enforce a system of rape and abuse towards women and girls. This way, they follow a tradition from Mohammad's time' (Prendergast 2017:30). It is in this context that the warnings of some scholars – now a decade old – must be understood; that spiritualized interpretations of Islam's sacred sources are the flip side of the literal interpretations by the violent Islamists. The former have been characterized as 'the misplaced gurus [of a] lucrative *spirituality* industry,' and their ideological positions are seen as 'the pathological compensations' for the political atrocities of the latter (Dabashi 2008:213).

Mediating the spiritual and the sensual

The strength of Kahf's commentary is in its recognition of the interplay of fantasy and reality, and negotiating their interaction. That is to say, she is cognizant of her own relation to the affective structure of the text and circulation of power in it. Whereas spiritualized readings of the text establish binary oppositions between the sensual and spiritual (or reality and fantasy), Kahf focuses on mediation between the two kinds of interpretation. Her commentary shows that access to the affective significance of the sensual imagery of paradise is contingent upon the ways in which they are mediated. For example, we can read this 'mediative' capacity in her description of the assistant imam acting as translator. When he is asked the question 'Do women get to have sex in paradise too?,' the assistant imam is described as leaning forward, whispering in the imam's ears:

@@@[H]is eyes downcast, his long eyelashes lying down and surrendering on his cheeks. He is unaware of the grace of his half-turned torso. Glory be to God. Carpet,

not crotch, I will my eyes. Sex on the mosque floor, a flash fantasy, to try out tonight in bed with my brand-new husband, the packaging still fresh, yes. (Kahf 2007:16) ~

It would be simplistic to suggest that eroticizing the young male assistant imam in the space of the mosque and the context of a Qur'an study circle is a way to subvert patriarchal norms. Kahf's goal is not transgression. In fact, transgression is produced by established relations of power and is integral to supporting structures of power. The radical unsettling of the masculine self-same imaginary is best achieved through conformity to the masculine imaginary itself (Tourage 2012). This strategy of meeting patriarchy on its own terms (Anderson 1997:226) has been variably called 'mimesis' (Irigaray 1985:164), irony, hyperbole and parody (Butler 1990:137–49; Hutcheon 1985; Tyler 2003:23). Kahf locates herself within the limits of patriarchal normative discourse. Her characters freely express their sexual desires, but the text makes it clear that they act on them within the limits of their marriage to their husbands. In their conversation in a café after the study circle, they openly speak of their sexual practices and fantasies. The narrator, who is newlywed, speaks of how 'We just got to oral sex a week ago.' (Kahf 2007:19). They express their sexual fantasies about a whole group of actors, singers and academics, from George Clooney and George Michael to one of their former high school teachers and Edward Said. But as one of them states: 'Not for real, I mean. I wouldn't do that to my Hamudy. I am not an adulteress. But just for fun. Fantasy time. I'd do the pipe boy. Wouldn't you?' (Kahf 2007:19) Hence, Kahf takes the claims and promises of the text seriously. For example, after the imam's answer 'Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise,' Kahf's female character Maryam says: 'What about the aya [verse] that says "round about, boys of eternal youth shall serve them?" What about that?' (Kahf 2007:16) In these passages, she locates herself within patriarchal logic. Her model of intervention is not an emancipatory one, which dismisses anything other than overt acts of resistance as false consciousness and internalization of patriarchal norms (Mahmood 2004:6). Rather, she mediates the complexities of the power relations that structure affective entanglements with the text.

Whereas the spiritualized readings divest the text from its sensual affects and construct coherent and autonomous paradisaal bodies, in Kahf's story bodies are reinvested with their elemental functions. Kahf's embodied reading works against two main strands of Qur'anic commentary: the symbolic-allegorical interpretations of the text and the literalist interpretations by the violent Muslim extremists. Contrary to these two readings, Kahf's reading is not about imagining a spiritualized body in a yet-to-come future, nor returning to a glorified Golden Age of the past. In Kahf's reading, affect of the future (or the past) is felt here and now through an interaction of abstract spiritual bodies with their corpo-reality. An example can be found in the following passage, where discussion of paradisaal and earthly sexual joys are blended into each other:

@@@[S]itting on the prayer floor ... with our legs tucked to one side under our caftans ... but still close enough to smell the sandalwood scent from the stocky body

of the assistant imam. He sits semi-kneeling with his ankles tucked up under his butt, his pants straining against the posture. I try not to look at his crotch. Carpet. Carpet. I look at the curlicues in the carpet instead. (Kahf 2007:16) ~

This blending of paradisaal and earthly joys, and their overlap with present bodies and sexual affects generated by them, goes against the disembodied spiritualized reading of the sexual imagery. This is particularly significant in the gendered space of the mosque where, in order to prescribe preconceived affects, female and male bodies are hierarchically organized. In other words, controlling bodies is indeed controlling affects produced through them, assuming that affects are stable and controllable. Kahf's commentary, on the other hand, shows that the body is a vital site of production of a whole series of potencies that exceed its corporeality. For example, the body is the locus of the production of meanings, archiving memories of the past and imaginings of the future (Connerton 1989:72–104).

The body is also vital to the production of affects. Affect is not a preexisting formation that can be accessed and inscribed on bodies in prescriptive ways. Affect is reproduced in ways that are always already contingent. The text does not yield only specific affective results, just as it does not produce only a specific meaning. The production of affect is not an event but a relational process that unfolds along the contours of the bodies that are, for example, gendered, sexed, classed and are marked by racialized complexities and varying abilities. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's insight, affective encounter with the complexities of bodies (textual or biological) is to confront the perception of the past, present and future (Merleau-Ponty 1945:235). In other words, neither affects, the past, present nor the future are unproblematically given; mediated access to them is fractured through the complexities of bodies and their lived experiences in time and space. It is no surprise that the body is often used as a metaphor for the larger religious cosmologies (Eilberg-Schwartz 1992:8).

What we can take away from Kahf's 'fiction as commentary' is that affect is not intrinsic to the text. It is rather reconstructed through a process of signification in a modulated economy of exchange between text and bodies that are equally unstable. That is to say, neither sensual nor spiritual, neither fantasy nor reality are universal categories with predetermined contents. They are defined by terms of exchange within the affective structure of the text. By intervening in the process of mediation, Kahf centers the complexities of bodies and the multiplicities of desires that produce alternative affects and pathways to pleasure. She shows that affect is an unstable formation which allows for variations in interpretation, dissemination and reception of Qur'anic sexual imagery. Therefore, the lesson of Kahf's piece (or Ahmed Ahmed's joke) is that the significance of sexual union in paradise – physical or symbolic, dirty or sublime, involving *houris*, young boys or with 'whores' – is tangled in a web of discursively constructed interpretive practices, logics of affect production and relations of power. The affective intensities produced by the sexual imagery of paradise exceed restrictive classification within the antagonistic sensual/spiritual categories.

The Qur'anic paradise is an unstable 'fantasy' of an originary site, which points to the contingent nature of affect and meaning production. Paradise could be conceived as a cosmic territory which does not exist (yet!). Its coordinates, however, are anticipated in a yet-to-come future. In this sense, the Qur'anic paradise is a Baudrillardian 'similitude,' a copy for which there is no original (Baudrillard 1994). This means that all affective entanglements with the text remain relational and contextual. The libidinal significance in the text should therefore orient us towards the erotic, which in Audre Lorde's understanding is 'the nurturer of all our deepest knowledge' (Lorde 2007:56). The erotic conditions offer creative possibilities of opened signification and circulation of affectivity. The literal and sanitized symbolic readings of the text, on the other hand, foreclose these possibilities by limiting interpretation of paradisaic rewards to their functional capacity as allegories of spiritual union. They admit only narrow affective modalities that ontologize the sexual pleasures of paradise as disembodied self-referential categories.

About the author

Mahdi Tourage, PhD (2005, University of Toronto), is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Social Justice and Peace Studies in the Department of Religious Studies, King's University College, London Ontario, Canada. His book *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* was published in 2007 (Brill) and his coedited volume (with Philipp Valentini) *Esoteric Lacan* in 2019 (Rowman & Littlefield). His publications have appeared in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, *Iranian Studies*, and *Performing Islam*. His areas of interest are Islamic religious thought, Sufism, gender and sexuality, and psychoanalysis.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Lauren Osborne and Kathryn Kueny for inviting me to present an earlier draft of this paper in the panel 'Emotion and Affect in and around the Qur'an,' at the 2018 American Academy of Religion annual meeting, Denver, Colorado. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions that improved the final draft of this paper.

References

- Abdel Haleem, M. (1999) *Understanding the Quran: Themes and Styles*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Ahmed, A. (2007) 'Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.' Image Entertainment.

- Ahmed, S. (2012) The skin of the community: affect and boundary formation. In T. Chanter and E. Plonoswka Ziarek (eds) *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis* 95–112. New York: SUNY Press.
- Ahmed, W. (2017) The characteristics of paradise (*sifat al-janna*): a genre of eschatological literature in medieval Islam. In S. Gunther and T. Lawson (eds) *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* 817–50. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004333154_040
- Ali, K. (2006) *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. Oxford: One World.
- Ali, K. (2013) The omnipresent male scholar. *Critical Muslim* 8: 61–73.
- Al-Azmeh, A. (1995) Rhetoric for the senses: a consideration of Muslim paradise narratives. *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26(3): 215–31. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006495X00184>
- Al Maleh, L. (2009) Anglophone Arab literature: an overview. In L. Al Maleh (ed.) *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* 1–65. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042027190_002
- Anderson, P. S. (1997) *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bailey, A. and DiGangi, M. (eds) (2017) *Affect Theory and Early Modern Texts: Politics, Ecologies, and Form*. New York: Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56126-8>
- Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. S. F. Glaser). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9904>
- Beauvoir, S. de (2010) *The Second Sex* (trans. C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier). New York: Knopf.
- Berg, H. (1998) Elijah Muhammad: an African American Muslim *mufassir*? *Arabica* 45(3): 320–46. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157005898774230392>
- Bolter, J. D. and Grusin, R. (1999) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bouhdiba, A. (1985) *Sexuality in Islam* (trans. A. Sheridan). London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'* New York: Routledge.
- Connerton, P. (1989) *How Societies Remember*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628061>
- Cook, D. (2007) *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511810688>
- Dabashi, H. (2008) *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203928387>
- Davis, H. E., Zine, J. and Taylor, L. K. (2007) An interview with Mohja Kahf. *Intercultural Education* 18(4): 383–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980701605386>
- Denny, F. M. (2001–6) Eyes. In J. D. McAuliffe (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an, Volumes 1–6* 2.153–4. Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill.

- Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, H. (ed.) (1992) *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- El-Rouayheb, K. (2005) *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* 156. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226729909.001.0001>
- Evans, D. (1996) *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (trans. R. Hurley). New York: Vintage Books.
- Hammer, J. (2008) Identity, authority, and activism: American Muslim women approach the Qur'an. *Muslim World* 98: 453–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2008.00239.x>
- Hammer, J. (2012) *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (1985) *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen.
- Irigaray, L. (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. C. Porter and C. Burke). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Juschka, D. (2001) Preface. In D. Juschka (ed.) *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*. New York: Continuum.
- Kahf, M. (2007) Lustrous companions: 'Do we get dick in heaven?' *Arkansas Times* 13 September, pp. 16, 19. Little Rock, Arkansas.
- Kinberg, L. (2001–6) Paradise. In J. D. McAuliffe (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an, Volumes 1–6* 4.12–20. Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill.
- Koivunen, A. (2001) Preface: the affective turn? In A. Koivunen and S. Paasonen (eds) *Conference Proceedings for Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies* 7–9. University of Turku, School of Art, Literature and Music, Media Studies Series A.49. <https://susannapaasonen.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/proceedings.pdf>
- Lane, E. W. (1955–6) *Arabic–English Lexicon*. New York: Ungar.
- Lorde, A. (2007) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. New York: Crossing Press.
- Mahmood, S. (2004) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Massumi, B. (2015) *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Mattawa, K. (2008) Writing Islam in contemporary American poetry: on Mohja Kahf, Daniel Moore, and Agha Shahid Ali. *Modern Language Association* 123(5): 1590–5. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1590>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Najmabadi, A. (2005) *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nasr, S. H., Dagli, C. K., Dakake, M. M., Lumbard, J. E. B. and Rustom, M. (eds) (2015) *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Neuwirth, A. (2017) Paradise as a Quranic discourse: late antique foundations and early Quranic developments. In S. Gunther and T. Lawson (eds) *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* 67–92. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004333154_006
- Prendergast, M. A. (2017) Madonnas and whores or blood and gore? Roles for women in the so-called Islamic State. Master's thesis. Peace and Conflict Studies, Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, Universitet i Oslo. <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/59933/Molly-Prendergast-PECOS-master-s-thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Roded, R. (2001–6) Women and the Quran. In J. D. McAuliffe (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an, Volumes 1–6* 2.523–41. Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill.
- Rustomji, N. (2017) Beauty in the garden: aesthetics and the *Wildān*, *Ghilmān*, and *Ḥūr*. In S. Gunther and T. Lawson (eds) *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* 295–307. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004333154_014
- Shaikh, S. (2003) Family planning, contraception, and abortion in Islam. In D. C. Maguire (ed.) *Sacred Rights: The Case of Contraception and Abortion in World Religions* 105–28. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195160017.003.0005>
- Tourage, M. (2012) Towards the retrieval of the feminine from the archives of Islam. *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 6(2): 1–25. <https://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/624/630>
- Tyler, C.-A. (2003) *Female Impersonation*. New York: Routledge.
- Wadud, A. (1999) *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Žižek, S. (2000) *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London, New York: Verso Books.
- Žižek, S. (2007) *How to Read Lacan*. New York and London: Norton.
- Žižek, S. (2009) *A Glance into the Archives of Islam*. <http://www.lacan.com/zizarchives.htm>

The Ted K Archive

Mahdi Tourage

Affective entanglements with the sexual imagery of paradise in the Qur'an
2020-09-01

Body and Religion, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 52-70. bar (online) issn 2057-5831, bar (print)
issn 2057-5823. <doi.org/10.1558/bar.16180>
2020, Equinox Publishing

Equinox Publishing Ltd.

www.thetedkarchive.com