

Stepping out of the Closet Nonchalantly: Komail Aijazuddin's *Manboobs* (2024) and the Emergence of Pakistani Gay Memoir

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The British Empire introduced its first ever codification of criminal law to its Indian sub-continental subjects through the Indian Penal Code of 1860. Lord Macaulay instituted the colonial anti-sodomy statute Section 377, criminalizing same-sex desire in 1861 (Bhaskaran 15). As of 3 March 2025, about 64 countries worldwide still criminalize homosexuality, and Pakistan is one of them. Pakistan's neighboring state of India decriminalized consensual same sex on 6 September 2018, as the Indian Supreme Court repealed part of Section 377. Pakistan has had a troubling history of devising and revising its legal frameworks to govern its socio-political fabric since the nation's inception in 1947. Pakistan's three constitutional frameworks of 1956, 1962, and 1973 were either abrogated or put into abeyance by successive military rulers, thereby putting to rest any hope for a lasting rule of law. Caught within these murky legalities, non-normative sexual identities and alternative sexualities continue to be stigmatized. Criminalization of alternative sexual identities has led to the persecution of Pakistani subjects. Instead of empathy and allocation of state resources for local think tanks, policy makers, and law makers to ensure that LGBTQ+ Pakistanis are actively integrated within their communities, queer citizens face social ostracization, violence, blackmail, and intimidation. Rejected by their families and rendered homeless, some turn to sex work. Others with access to education and capital seek to leave Pakistan.

In an important study, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity* (2014), diasporic sociologist Momin Rahman outlines three main aspects of Muslim homosexuality: first, the smug Western assumption that homosexuality is aligned with modernity and modernization and that cultures in the East where it is criminalized are pre-modern; second, the importance of excavating archives of Muslim homo-eroticism; and third, "political possibilities" of sexual futures in Eastern cultures (2). Rahman, a Bengali Muslim scholar settled in Canada, is of the opinion that Muslim/Eastern cultures' acceptance of

queer citizens does not lie via the Western path of modernity and modernization, as “the Muslim experience of sexual diversity politics is significantly different.” He locates the causes for Muslim homophobia in the colonization of Eastern cultures, which “narrowed the acceptable definitions of sexual diversity” among them. Eastern cultures, he believes, can be relieved of the colonial legacy of homophobia by recognizing Muslim homoerotic traditions (Rahman 4-5). Understanding modernity as intersectional is crucial for coming to terms with the complexities of contemporary queer Muslim experience, which, if understood otherwise, might lead to a synthetic “opposition between Muslim cultures and [Western] sexual diversity” (Rahman 6). These polarized positions help explain Muslim homophobia and resultant Western Islamophobia.

These concerns about cultural and religious polarization impacting LGBTQ+ lives are explored in South Asian fiction and life writing. This literary tradition is indirectly invoked and referenced in Kmail Aijazuddin's *Manboobs*. After briefly referencing this tradition in this article, we move on to the memoir's evocation of gender dysphoria. Finally, we turn our discussion to the author-narrator's complex life experiences as a gay Muslim man in North America. The author-narrator embodies class and educational privilege in a way that explains the nonchalance with which he narrates his coming out story and how he creates a life as a Pakistani American gay man facing uncertainty in national and diasporic spaces. His social background, we argue, is what gives this memoir its characteristic tone. Despite ostracism from family and some friends in Pakistan, he is not threatened by an imminent death sentence, as might other gay subjects from marginalized castes, classes, and religions when faced with similar socio-familial situations. We argue that Aijazuddin's narrative contests homocolonialist assumptions that the West is the savior of queer Muslims from other parts of the world, even as the work remains embedded in some of these assumptions in the way the memoir reflects the author's upper-class upbringing and the privileged perspectives that entails.

South Asian LGBTQ+ Life Writing

Memoir, a sub-genre of life writing, is often interchangeably used with autobiography. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2024) mention how recent theorizations of the form emphasize its “prominence as a form of democratic public utterance” (273). Aijazuddin's gay memoir *Manboobs: A Memoir of Musicals, Visas, Hope, and Cake* (2024) is a public utterance of gay life in Pakistan that ostensibly mimics many salient features of Western gay narratives – early sexual discovery, social angst, coming out, and finding a queer community – that may not resonate with experiences of Pakistani LGBTQ+ subjects from diverse backgrounds. Smith and Watson refer to such a narrative trajectory as following “the nascent sense

of same-sex desire, the psychic costs of passing as heteronormative, the turning point of proclaiming one's sexual orientation, and the aftereffects of that act, as well as struggles to embody and validate chosen sexual identities" (298). With few exceptions, critical discussions of South Asian life writing have focused on middle-class LGBTQ+ lives, though there are some representations and critical analyses of working-class lesbian oral life narratives from India (Batra, Sukthankar, Sharma). With this work as the backdrop, *Manboobs* is an unapologetic representation of largely comfortable middle-class homosexuality, despite the author encountering some hostility in interactions with his family and the larger community who attempt to shame him for his sexuality.

The work participates in the tradition of South Asian LGBTQ+ life writing – autobiography, autobiographical fiction, biography, ethnography, and memoir – extending from Sri Lankan Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Indian Parsi author Hoshang Merchant's *The Man Who Would Be Queen: Autobiographical Fictions* (2011), Pakistani Canadian Samra Habib's *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir* (2019) to British Pakistani Noreen Masud's recently published *A Flat Place: Moving Through Empty Landscapes, Naming Complex Trauma* (2023). Quite likely the author is aware of these and other preceding works. In fact, sections of *Manboobs* reflect coming-of-age experiences of school bullying in Arjie Chelvaratnam's sexual exploration as a young Tamil boy growing up amid the looming threat of civil conflict in Sri Lanka which Selvadurai describes in *Funny Boy*. Like Arjie, Aijazuddin discovers his sexuality quite early—at age six—in his friendship with nine-year-old Zariyan, his school mate at a private all-male institution in Lahore that the author ominously names as "The Academy." Though the attraction is mutual, the relationship is unequal. Zariyan is affectionate and friendly in private but mocks him in public by calling him "khusra," a local term for transgender individuals (Aijazuddin 44). Zariyan avoids the author-narrator in public because he knows that their association might lead to speculation, especially since Aijazuddin is conscious of his effeminate physique, including the titular manboobs. Later, Zariyan's closeted sexuality morphs into adult heteronormativity as he succumbs to societal strictures.

Besides a clandestine sexual relationship, Aijazuddin also befriends Jibrán, Noor, and Ayaan, a brotherhood of overtly effeminate and like-minded schoolboys: "I found the family [...] that would walk with me, hand in manicured hand, for decades to come" (58). His family of choice echoes anthropologist Kath Weston's elaboration of extended kin in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1997 [1991]). Though all four members of the brotherhood are gay, the threat of public shaming prevents them from declaring their gayness even to each other. Jibrán confesses and comes out only when he is leaving for Canada leading to a moment of "euphoria," which he describes as an "indescribable rush of joy, belonging, excitement, and relief" at the disclosure (72). The euphoria on discovering gay familial bonds also makes a cameo appearance at the

end of the memoir when all four friends, clad in their shimmering drag queen outfits, participate in the Drag Invasion event on Fire Island in New York. Their comradeship makes his experience different from that of the teenage protagonist in Selvadurai's novel, though both works focus on social conflict and diasporic migration.

Another possible influence on the memoir is Samra Habib's 2020 Lambda Literary Award-winning, *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir*. Here, too, the narrator describes their struggles with expressing their sexuality in Pakistan, migration to Canada, challenges faced in a new society which ostensibly promotes but does not practice acceptance, and coming to terms with their family and new life through faith and art. The gay male author-narrator's experience of coming out in *Manboobs* shares some features with yet another recent Pakistani diasporic lesbian memoir, Lamya H's *Hijab Butch Blues* (2023). Lamya's experience of discovering her sexuality in the "Arab country" her parents moved to is within the context of the Quranic *Surah Maryam*. The differences between the gay male memoir and lesbian works are marked, in Aijazuddin's work, by the nonchalance indicative of the author-narrator's upper class, English-educated, secular background and somewhat sangfroid affect versus the zealotry of Habib and Lamya's intertwining of Islamic faith with their gender and sexual identity.

Body Image, Dysphoria, and Lineage

If there is a class-inflected nonchalance about sexuality in *Manboobs*, it is counterposed by the author-narrator's anxious discomfort/unease with his body. The memoir's detailed personal information about his natural effeminacy, including prominent breasts, conveys that part of his unease, at it is related to his body image, which is a consequence of social gendering that impacts men and women, though in different ways. In this sense his dysphoria encumbers him with an intense lifelong self-consciousness about his body. In sum, the emphasis on gynecomastia and corrective surgery is framed multiply: first, as a response to social gendering that dictates ideal characteristics in bodies gendered as male or female; next, as assimilation into Western gay aesthetics; and finally, as a relief from dysphoria.

Recollecting his visit to the galleries at the Royal Fort of Lahore with his father when he was nine years old, the author explores the origins of his complex understandings about social expectations related to gender presentation. His father had pointed out a portrait of one of his ancestors on display, and he could clearly see his resemblance with the ancestor who possessed "a magnificent pair of tits" (Aijazuddin 117). This condition of gynecomastia or enlargement of breast tissue in men appears to have a component of genetic heritability in his family. As he contemplates the portrait, the narrator experiences a moment of epiphany as he recognizes that his breasts were a biological continuation of this lineage. He guesses that his ancestor might have faced the dilemma he now faces even as he

succumbed to the pressures of continuing the family through matrimony and procreation. From a narrative perspective, such an approach appears too advanced for a nine-year-old child. In thinking about alternative identity, the author-narrator is troubled by the question: “What would happen when [he wouldn’t] live up to the most basic form of genetic replication” unlike his ancestor in the painting (117). His self-consciousness and an attempt to seek corrective surgery later in life does not imply that he seeks disidentification from his ancestor; rather, it may be understood as a desire to acquire sexual oomph to fit a certain conception of gay masculinity. By the end of the memoir, the prominent breasts have been corrected by surgery, presumably making the author-narrator more comfortable in his own skin and enhancing his desirability for potential relationships in his adopted country, America. By then the question of “genetic replication” that troubled him as a child has been replaced by an acceptance of his presumably non-procreative gay male sexuality.

Besides charting this ancestry, the author-narrator charts a process of discovery of gay identity via literary-mythical lineage by referring to legendary Niankhkhnun, Hadrian and Antinous, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu (118) as proof that it is love and not merely desire that has sustained gay relationships. He also allays fear of death by AIDS by asserting that homosexual relations are essentially marked by the love men feel for other men rather than indiscreet sex with available men. Such an idealization of gay male sexuality based on love (rather than lust) challenges prevailing notions about sexual relations as “inherently unsafe, essentially dirty, and inevitably lethal” (Aijazuddin 98). These biological, literary, and mythical ancestors help him anchor both dysphoria and sexual desire in well-documented modes of living and loving.

Shuttling between the past and the present, the author-narrator simultaneously invokes local Muslim and somewhat distant Western mythical examples in Achilles, Patroclus and others to provide templates for his own life. Familial and historical legacies are crucial as patterns as modern Western values discredit Muslim cultures as anachronistic, and the media represents gay Muslims as a universally persecuted group who are waiting to be saved from their own society and culture.

Muslim and Gay in the West

Manboobs recounts a series of encounters to assert that the West touts its own liberal and modern values via a homocolonialist perspective that singles out the lack of such values in non-Western nations. When Aijazuddin visits the United States for the first time at the age of thirteen, he realizes that if there were any “prospect[s] of an impending gay life [for him, it was] at college abroad” (80). Embedded in and simultaneously trying to contest colonial perspectives, his quest for education abroad is not as smooth as expected. Dreaming of America as “a place without oppressive religiosity and feudal posturing,” where “being gay wasn’t a

death sentence” (86), his rejection by US institutions makes him contemplate ending his life, as there is little scope of freedom in Pakistan.

Migration to Canada to study in Montreal is a silver lining in his otherwise bleak Pakistani life. Just seventeen years old, he does not so much as step out, but rather breaks through the closet to come out to his dorm-mates on the very first day of his arrival in Montreal. To his bewilderment, declaring his sexuality leads to hate even in Canada, which officially legalized same-sex marriage in 2005 through the enactment of Civil Marriage Act. He finds a note addressing him as a “faggot” on his door. On yet another occasion he is publicly shamed and assaulted for being gay by a Desi Canadian named Ash who explodes a beer bottle on the wall in front of him. Although Ash the bully is a fellow South Asian, this incident demonstrates that gay subjects have a long way to go to secure a peaceful social co-existence in the first world. The college administration urges Aijazuddin to press charges against the culprit so that the law may take its natural course while reminding him that since “homophobic slurs” were routine in Canada he should show patience (103). The author-narrator knows that what he has faced in Montreal is about being openly out amid six hundred (mostly white) students. Though the bullying Desi Canadian is made to apologize by the university administration, his apology—“I got nothin’ but mad respect for you, bro, being gay from Pakistan”—rings false (104).

Aijazuddin experiences intimidation and hostility for not taking off his shirt at a gay club among a shirtless gay crowd. As a shy Pakistani newly arrived in Canada, self-conscious about his breasts, it is difficult for him to go shirtless where flaunting the body is the norm. He is caught between extremes of Canadian society where gay people are not allowed to express themselves in mainstream public/social places and simultaneously not permitted the freedom to underperform their sexuality in gay spaces. Furthermore, brown bodies are objectified as exotic or outsiders. He grows increasingly discontented at the quality of his gay freedom in Canada. Western hypocrisy unfolds with the discovery that gay spaces have their own biases based on fetishization of the body. This seals his decision to leave Montreal for New York - the city from where “gayness itself emanated” (Aijazuddin 104).

The author-narrator’s sense of his family’s homophobia and disappointment with Canada are motivating factors in seeking admission to New York University. He nonchalantly and naively believes that in New York, right under the shadow of the Stonewall Inn, he might find a loving boyfriend and start an ‘authentic’ gay life. During his years there he remains actively involved with gay causes, acutely conscious of the fact that his writings are “met with approving smiles because now [he] was performing [his] part in the play as the gay Muslim being rescued by the West” (124). However, such acceptance is only at face value, as in Canada. His catastrophic brush with Professor Klaus opens his eyes to another angle of blackmailing by a fellow gay person. The sense of being

a “naïve boy prize to the kind of predatory hunters” reveals that even here sexuality can be used to blackmail (135). He testifies to his adopted culture’s bright face, as theorized by Rahman, who recognizes that Western exceptionalism of taking up banners for the LGBTQ+ cause confirms the West’s colonialist designs. The homocolonialist ‘test’ is the complex situation of postcolonial states’ resistance to the Western-imposed agenda of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility while continuing the colonial legacy of antipathy to homosexuality and garnering neocolonial allies in the West (Rahman 8).

Not very different from the biases encountered in the West, being gay in Pakistan is difficult at best and dangerous at worst, though the author-narrator fashions a calculated indifference to dangers of normative gendering and sexuality. If being gay is equal to being modern in the Western schema, then in the same schema being Muslim is equal to being traditional, religious, and heterosexual, complicating identities at the intersections of modernity and Muslimness. Because Muslim identity is also assumed to be inherently repressive of women, masculinity is often expressed via women’s repression leading to the question: what would be the fate of feminine “men fail[ing] to become men”? (Rahman 19). As gender equality is the primary test of democracy under Western eyes, Muslim cultures are automatically othered when they are assumed to repress women. However, the pattern of Western “history of democracy and equality” as “a partial rather than universal development” (Rahman 36) is immediately discernable in American support of autocratic regimes in Pakistan and other locations based on their strategic interests in South Asia. Pakistan is a classic example, having had four Western-backed military regimes that receive direct support from the US to carry out their authoritarian, undemocratic rule. Hence “acceptance of sexual diversity becomes an exemplary test of democratic cultural and governance credentials amongst Western nations” (Rahman 45). The story of such exceptionalism is challenged because, as *Manboobs* documents, biases against sexual diversity exist globally, not just in the East.

Extreme Islamophobia and xenophobia were (and in some respects continue to be) rampant across America post-9/11. Aijazuddin and Muslim migrants faced the humiliation of National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) every time they entered/exited the United States post 9/11. This is the period when “American obsession with race is immediately obvious and brutally enforced” and the author was just “a brown-skinned Muslim male before [he] was anything else” (Aijazuddin 113). He clearly notes that the NSEERS interrogations during his entry or exit were conspicuously marked by “homophobic lighting” along with Islamophobic xenophobia (116). Perplexed by post-9/11 social complications that affected brown, gay, and Muslim men like him, he discovers through a conversation with a taxi driver that he can seek asylum on the basis of his sexual orientation. He reads this as another Western ploy to demonstrate its own liberal credentials, especially as there is rampant misuse of the asylum category by people like the taxi driver

who received his US visa by pretending to be a persecuted gay man in Pakistan. Aijazuddin also knows that seeking asylum will jeopardize his chances of visiting his country and family for the next ten years. At this point in his life, he is not prepared to completely sever ties with the homeland despite restrictions on queer lives in Pakistan.

Homocolonial Rainbows and Pakistani Queer Cultures

Even at the risk of generalization, it is possible to assert that there are only faint traces of a publicly visible queer culture in Pakistan. There is, however, an underground gay male subculture to which the author-narrator has some access. This counters some Western prejudices encountered by the narrator where his Western interlocutors ask or suggest: “How did you see the light of our rainbow from inside one of those dark brown countries that hate freedoms” (Aijazuddin 3). Within Pakistan there are limited spaces of queer expression, though there are no Pakistani queer public events such as Pride Parades or fourth of July celebrations. Western celebrations such as those in memory of a New York drag queen humiliated by a bartender for being in feminine attire in 1976 who gathered her friends also dressed as drag queens to invade the bar in protest, preserve queer history. The bartender, recognizing the fragility of the situation, offered free drinks for all the friends for the rest of the night. Since then, the event, dubbed as ‘The Invasion of the Pines’ is celebrated like Independence Day, and thousands of gay drag queens march to the Pine Harbor to commemorate the battle they had won. The memoir ends with this celebration of Drag Invasion to send a strong, though Western-influenced message to Pakistani gay readers that they, too, have their personal battles to fight and histories to preserve, requiring confidence and support from the gay families they make.

Despite this message of hope, the persistence of the closet inhibits queer connections within Pakistan. Since there is little openness about gay lives, the author learns much later that Jibran had been sleeping with Bilal Sadiq, one of the macho boys of the school. Years later he finds out that Bilal was married to one of his childhood friends, Tara, who teased him about his effeminacy. The discussion of his ancestor’s as well as Bilal’s bisexuality provides a way in which the author explores Pakistan as a homosocial environment. He shares the ways in which queer men negotiate their sexuality through marriage and secret relationships. This enables the author to underscore that “hiding in the plain sight is one of the ways that queer people can live with some measure of agency” (78). While the social situation is slowly shifting, there are insurmountable religious and cultural barriers to creating a dignified queer life in the country.

The first ever attempt to make Pakistani gay life visible was sponsored by the US Embassy in Islamabad on 26 June 2011. The Embassy organized a Gay Pride Parade attended by only 75 people (Charania 42). This overtly homocolonial agenda was looked down upon by the Pakistani

public and LGBTQ+ communities alike. Activist figures like Nawas Manto, founder of Pakistan Queer Movement (PQM), were and continue to be distrustful of imported interventionist activism promoting queer visibility and rights. Nawas Manto, clearly channeling the famous progressive writer of partition narratives and his namesake, Sadat Hassan Manto, counters external interference by offering an indigenous model of queer activism inspired by the famous Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) in the Urdu literary tradition, aiming for a queer-friendly shift. He prefers such an approach over one that flaunts queerness by marching in public spaces wearing pink underwear (Nawas Manto qtd. in Charania 59). Manto's position is like Rahman's who, too, rejects imported models of queer visibility and rights to make a case for rediscovering Eastern literary traditions of homoeroticism. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai successfully address this issue in their edited work, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000). Vanita and Kidwai's landmark work was a collaborative anthologization project which included life writing from India. It was published and republished by mainstream presses such as St. Martin's, Palgrave Macmillan, and Penguin in the US, UK, and India. *Manboobs*, a single-authored memoir, being published by US based Abrams Press, specializing in narrative non-fiction relating to arts and culture, food, style, design, history, current events, science, technology, memoir, and biography, is one small step in the direction of the emergence of narratives of same-sex desire in Pakistan, similar to Vanita and Kidwai's endeavor. Though it documents a few homegrown aspects of queer visibility, the narrative is more directly influenced by non-Pakistani models of gay life and queer identity as indicated by the nonchalant subtitle of the work: "A memoir of musicals, visas, hope, and cake."

Pakistani queer culture is not all about visas and cake and musicals, as the subtitle seems to indicate. Much of it exists precariously on the margins of mainstream heteronormative society. Recent studies by Ibrahim Noorani, Mudassir Hussain (2025) and Muhammad Zeeshan Younas (2025) testify to gradual social acceptance of peripheral Pakistani queer culture. Noorani and Hussain describe LGBTQ+ communities that have surfaced in Pakistani urban spaces as a natural result of the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in capitalist societies. They argue that just as Black communities and women became active participants in the process of capital and social accumulation after the mid-20th century by inflecting the Enlightenment categories of 'humans,' 'class,' and 'nation' that previously excluded them, LGBTQ+ communities emerged globally in the second half of the 20th century (Noorani & Hussain 97). Further, they assert that the Pakistani LGBTQ+ population is struggling to deterritorialize gender constructs. Commentators predict a "head-on collision" between Pakistani women and transgender populations within the next two decades (98). Despite doomsday predictions, limited emergence of queer communities in the country is documented in *Manboobs*.

Closeted or not, Pakistani queer presence and active participation in the process of capital accumulation is likely to increase due to “broader societal transformations, acceptance, legalization, [and] cultural transitions” (Noorani and Hussain 108). Muhammad Zeeshan Younas’s (2025) study corroborates these findings by observing a notable upswing in social tolerance for Pakistani LGBTQ+ communities in general and homosexuality in particular, since the second decade of the 21st century. Younas believes increased social acceptance of Pakistani sexual minorities in the urban spaces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), South Punjab, and Sindh is due to education, diversity, access to progressive media, and exposure to diverse viewpoints (137). Though cosmopolitan urban spaces are gradually becoming somewhat accommodative to LGBTQ+ visibility and rights, more support and activism is needed on socio-political and religio-legal fronts to ensure safety and dignity of queer Pakistani subjects living in rural spaces. Suggested measures include better law enforcement, anti-discrimination legislation, and public awareness campaigns to foster acceptance and challenge stereotypes for a safe and visible queer culture in the country (Younas 145). Crucially, these efforts should be homegrown and not externally imposed by countries such as the US. Instead of the diasporic gay author’s attention to cakes, visas, and musicals, working-class Pakistani queer identities are likely to be focused on daily bread, national identity and ration cards, and Bollywood.

Nonchalant Gay Identity

Recent accounts of gay life in Pakistan often paint an overly optimistic picture by referring to acceptance of sexual diversity among younger, educated sections of the population. While this may be true of a particular class or cross-section of people, it does not apply universally. Despite some precarity, the author-narrator’s coming out in *Manboobs* is not as consequential because of his status in Pakistani society. With an affluent background enabling the family to afford a luxurious lifestyle, excursion trips abroad, and an American education, the author-narrator receives a relatively lenient social and familial response when he eventually steps out of the closet. Though his parents disapprove, he makes a choice to leave them to seek a family of his own for what he assumes will be a peaceful life in America. Had he kept his identity a secret and succumbed to heterosexual norms—like his ancestor in the painting or Tara’s husband Bilal Sadiq—he would most certainly have married and lived a hypocritical life while trying to pass as a straight man. Tara and others who are married to closeted gay men represent a hidden pact; it is hard, if not impossible, to keep track of the many compromised false marriages.

The memoir implicitly acknowledges the psychological damage gay men suffer and inflict on others in society, though the critique is not carried forward in a sustained manner. Accepting gay lives or even ensuring that they exist without persecution might, in the narrator’s opinion, not only ensure social and psychological well-being but also

safeguard women from false, risky, unhappy marriages. For many Pakistanis this is not an option. Some are married under duress, while others risk losing their lives by venturing out of the closet as described by Badruddin Khan in his essay “Not-So-Gay Life in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s.” While Aijazuddin asserts that his and the larger queer population’s situation back home is precarious, it is also cushioned by wealth, education, and the option of hiding in a marriage of convenience in a politically and religiously volatile society.

Persecution on religious grounds is a looming reality in the narrator’s experiences. His return to Pakistan in 2011 after completing his studies in America marks the period when Salman Taseer, the Peoples Party associated Governor of the Punjab Province, had just been murdered for questioning blasphemy laws in Pakistan. Aijazuddin’s own life as a Pakistani is subject to threats because his lifestyle is contrary to socially and religiously accepted heterosexual norms. Since coming back from the US, he also started making gold leaf paintings around homosexual relationships, which ran afoul of blasphemy laws. Nevertheless, the paintings offered him a means of employment to secure financial and personal autonomy. The paintings’ popularity among the Pakistani elite indicates their superfluous and hollow aesthetics and religious hypocrisy. All is good for the elite if it is chic and in fashion. Privilege and piecemeal acceptance offer the author-narrator a certain level of protection from religious retaliation not available to many others.

Though there is selective acceptance of his sexuality by some friends, the narrator’s family and the wider society do not accept him. His parents present themselves as liberals with their “paintings and wineglasses, so surely homophobic bigotry had no place in [his] household of books and tarot cards” (Aijazuddin 126). He is disappointed with his liberal family. The myth of unconditional parental love is shattered when his mother’s “radiating disgust” for him makes her call him an “abhorrence, a scourge, [and] a disappointment” (127). Astonishingly, his father is sympathetic in contrast to his mother. Since he has disrupted familial heterosexual legacy, he is seen as an abomination. His mother declares him dead. Spurned by his mother, his journey back home brings new experiences of social outcasting. After shifting to a house named “Bridgebottom,” literally situated under a highway bridge, where he also works as a painter, he can explore his sexuality with more freedom, though “living alone was no real guarantee of safety as a gay man” (172).

One of the key narrative points in *Manboobs* is that gay social life in Pakistan faces constant intimidation and blackmail from neighbors, the police, the secret service, and religious ideologues. Indian gay novelist and critic R. Raj Rao (2025) points out that the strategy of moral policing and social blackmailing is a tactic used by governmental personnel to ensure that the gay community is under duress. Gay people are forced into unwilling compromises by paying hefty amounts to keep their police record clean. Rao problematizes the real nature of homophobia by calling it “cosmetic” as it “can easily be managed with tactfulness and cunning

when it pertains to society” and “with bribery when it comes to hoodlums and the police” (58). Such social or institutional policing is hardly motivated by “an archaic sense of morality or decency.” Rather, its motives lie in grabbing “the opportunity for pecuniary gain and benefit that the trapping of victims affords” (Rao 59).

Manboobs demonstrates a similar trajectory of sexual blackmail when the author’s chance encounter with a beverage waiter turns into a short-lived sexual liaison. The waiter introduces him to the clandestine night life of homosexual parties and offers to escort him to the Lahore gay underworld. His fling with the waiter ends abruptly when secret agency officials raid his house. However, these officials leave him alone thinking that as an artist whose work is popular among well-heeled Pakistanis, he is likely well connected to powerful people. Though the visit of the officials does not affect the author’s reputation, he loses a rare opportunity for a sexual rendezvous. Yet another sexual relationship with a “low-ranking officer in Navy” ends in a fiasco when the officer overdoses, passing out in front of him at his house (Aijazuddin 216). These risky encounters interrupt his otherwise comfortable life in Lahore.

The author’s trips to Europe and North America offer some reprieve, though he discovers the fear of coming out is as pervasive in the West as it is in the East. Here too his interactions are a result of specific social status. During one of these trips to London, he meets Sebastian, an English aristocrat, to tinker with the idea of marriage since both are from a ‘respectable’ background as is the custom for finalizing arranged marriages of heterosexual couples in Pakistan (191). Sebastian is closeted, refusing to hold his hand publicly despite “the comparative safety of Europe” (203). The author-narrator knows that the failure of his relationship with Sebastian is in fact the failure of their respective families to come to terms with their sons’ desires and of religion that has a chokehold over people. He reads his depression and Sebastian’s plight as entrenched in the hypocrisy of the West that “first caused, then denied, and then usurped those differences to further its own imperialist ends” (215-216).

After spending five years in Pakistan, Aijazuddin resolves to seek an ‘authentic’ life in America that might be less challenging and dangerous than his existence in Pakistan. His American Green Card was approved in 2015, the year when gay marriage was recognized by the American law. He ironically comments that this “elasticity of institutional tolerance in America” was applicable largely to American white gay men rather than being inclusive of migrants and people of color (225). He believes that “[h]omophobia didn’t simply evaporate in America with a Supreme Court ruling any more than racism did with the election of her first Black president” (228). More recently, while writing this article, such apprehensions are confirmed when the sitting 47th President of America declared emphatically during his second presidential address on 20 January 2025, that there will be only two genders recognized officially in

America. It may soon be the case that the legalization of gay marriage will be repealed.

Besides familial rejection, Muslim homophobic and Western homocolonial cultures operate on similar grounds of exclusivity furthered by “monocultural versions of religion.” Muslim homophobia is invested in its singular resistance to sexual diversity whereas Western homocolonialism exerts its cultural superiority by exhibiting sexual diversity as the sole “credential of advanced civilization” (Rahman 123), echoing the stance of the white man’s burden as a justification to colonize. For Rahman, approaching the contemporary world as contradictory and intersectional resists the view that liberal modern values characterize the West. In the absence of such resistance, queer Muslim intersectional identity will necessarily be located at the crossroads of homophobia and Islamophobia. Staunch positions of Muslim homophobia and Western Islamophobia, with hubris for their singularly superior cultures, will prevail until Eastern/Western cultural binarism is dismantled to ensure social dignity for queer Muslims (Rahman 132-136). Within Muslim cultures, social change regarding queer sexuality and identities is possible if there are efforts to reinterpret religion around issues of sexuality to make way for pluralism and diversity within Islamic thought. Furthermore, emerging versions of Muslim masculinities and femininities are likely to lead to social change around gender and sexuality. On this view, queer Muslim visibility and belonging could contribute to developing “a progressive sense of Muslim *pride*” and pave the way for the new versions and shapes of “masculinity, femininity, and social justice *beyond* Western bequests” (Rahman 153, italics in original).

Among studies of Muslim sexualities, Ibrahim Abraham’s (2009) account, although referring to Australian queer socio-political experience, describes queer Muslim identity as ‘enigmatic,’ unintelligible to heteronormative Muslims and Westerners, especially the latter who consider their Muslim counterparts dubious subjects (88-89). Referring to these observations, Rahman explains that the presence of a Muslim queer subject, howsoever impossible and unauthentic in the Eastern and Western heteronormative gaze, is enough to dismantle the centrality of the exclusive Western version of homosexuality, rendering the Western version “incomplete.” The queer Muslim’s lived experience of alternative sexual preferences corrodes the myth of “exclusive culturalism” touted by the East and the West providing them with their respective justifications for homophobia and Islamophobia. This makes these “exclusive” cultures “interconnected and interdependent rather than as static points in a civilizational opposition” (Rahman 115). One strategy to overcome the West-East dichotomization, where the former is positioned as superior in matters of sexuality, “is to refute the absolutist opposition between Muslims and sexual diversity by focusing on the traditions and contemporary formations of Muslim homo-eroticism.” Without adequate acknowledgement and understanding of Muslim homoeroticism it is not

possible to navigate through the complexities of Muslim and LGBTQ+ politics (69).

Talking about the gay scene in Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s, Badruddin Khan had warned Pakistanis as well as Pakistani Muslims abroad against “making big a show of ‘coming out’” as he deemed it equal to “writing their death sentences” (288). While much has changed since this warning, as revealed in studies conducted by Noorani and Hussain (2025) and Younas (2025), it is still not possible to be openly queer. Hence the proclaimed quest for a gay male identity at home and abroad in the first memoir of its kind is a welcome step towards queer visibility. In this sense, *Manboobs* marks the beginning of a homegrown Pakistani gay literary tradition, even as it is constrained by its class-specificity and diasporic ethos. Moreover, it indicates a tacit nonchalant acceptance of the Western coming out narratives that sometimes appears inauthentic and superficial. As the tradition of queer literature within Pakistani Anglophone literary writing is almost non-existent, the memoir is commendable for introducing gay male desire to Pakistani, South Asian, and global readers. It is at once a beginning, and, hopefully, a point of departure for the queer memoirs to follow, some of which will likely explore other class and social subjectivities that speak to a wider Pakistani reading public. One question which remains is whether local Pakistani publishers such as Liberty, Ilqa, Book Corner, and others will step up to bring out queer narratives so that the authors are not exclusively dependent on Euro-American publishing houses.

Aijazuddin’s prefatory note to the memoir, “Hello, welcome, I love what you’re wearing, and I’ve been waiting to meet you for a very long time,” draws its local and international readers into the narrative in a characteristically flamboyant manner. It is also an invitation for queer subjects to find the courage and strength to narrate their own stories, and contribute to contemporary Muslim LGBTQ+ literature, echoing the conviction of activist Nawas Manto that emerging Pakistani narratives will lead to change. Future literary accounts by marginalized voices (religious, ethnic, and social) will be more firmly grounded and serious additions to the growing body of Pakistani gay and queer writing inaugurated by *Manboobs*.

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