13. Gazelles In the Garden of Allah  
Homosexuality in the World of Islam

It has become painfully obvious in recent years that we in the West know dangerously little about Islam. One of the big mistakes we make is to presume that Islam is more or less a monolithic entity much like the Roman Catholic Church. On the contrary, many scholars, both Moslem and others, prefer to talk about Islam in the plural, meaning that there are many varieties which have evolved in different localities around the world.

Of course Islam was divided almost from the moment of the death of the Prophet: Muhammad’s preference as his successor was Ali, the husband of his daughter Fatimah, but while the family were busy with the funeral, the community in Medina elected Abu Bakr, the father of the Prophet’s favourite wife. Although for a time there was a compromise and Abu Bakr assumed the Caliphate\(^1\), later however, the community of Islam split into two sects. Of these, the Sunnis, the followers of Abu Bakr, now make up the majority of Moslems (about 800 million world-wide). They are called “sunny” because they accept as part of their Faith a number of pronouncements several reliable witnesses attested after the Prophet’s death were made by Muhammad and which are believed therefore to be pertinent to the interpretations of the Qur’an. These were first called “sunnas” and later have come to be known as “Hadith”. Sunni Moslems generally are more liberal.

The Shiites today number about 100 million worldwide, and are the more militant and orthodox of the two major sects. The main Shi’ite centres are in Iran, Iraq and Palestine. Unlike the Sunnis, who believe the Caliph must always be elected, the Shi’ites believe in Imams (that is, “leaders” or “guides”) who are the direct descendants of Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law. The Imams are infallible and the only source of proper religious instruction. There have been 12 Imams since Ali but the 12th went into hiding in 940 whence it is believed he will one day emerge and rule the world as "Mahdi" (or "Messiah"). In the meantime, "Ayatollahs", ("signs of God") serve as caretakers of the faith and the faithful.

\(^1\) The “Caliphs” were the successors to the Prophet Muhammad. During the Ottoman rule, they were called “Sultans”.
Among the many others, there are two other sects I should mention, the first of which are the "Wahhabi", a small extraordinarily Puritan and fundamentalist sect founded by al-Wahabi in the 18th Century which was largely ignored until, in 1932 it was the force behind the foundation of Saudi Arabia, and then more recently, when 9/11 brought its latter-day manifestation, Al Qaeda, to public attention.

The other sect we should note is that of the Sufi— the “wearers of the woollen robes”. Sufis seek mystical love and oneness with God and to this end, practise faqr (hence fakirs, meaning “pious poverty”) by living simple, communal and ascetic lives much like early Christian monks. Many of their mystical concepts include features borrowed from other religions, especially from Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Poetry, along with music and dance, has always played a central role in Sufi practice. Poetry, through the use of metaphor, has been the principle way of communicating the mystical messages of Sufism and many of the greatest poets in the Arabic language have been Sufis. It is worth noting too that our word “troubadour” comes from the Arabic root trb for “lutanist”.

The Sufis believed it was not sufficient to seek one’s personal union with God but essential that you also share the boundless joy this union brings with the people, to “live in this world, but not of it”, free from ambition, greed, and intellectual pride, showing love in living and not just knowing it. With this belief to back them up, the Sufi became virtually the missionaries of Islam, helping to spread the Faith to many other parts of the world, particularly along the trade routes of the day.

**Islam and homosexuality in Indonesia**

So for example, the form of Islam found in Java (Indonesia is the world’s largest Moslem nation), grew from contact in the late 13th and early 14th Centuries with mostly Sufi merchants and sailors who traded with the north coast of the island. Their mystical interpretations of Islam appealed to the Javanese who, until their conversion, were mystical Hindus and before that, mystical Buddhists and animists. These earlier religious beliefs have strongly influenced Indonesian Islam so that except among the so-called “santri” (the strict Moslems who predominate in regions such as Aceh, Madura and some parts of West Java) and the

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3 See Vlekke, Bernard HM: *Nusantara – A History of Indonesia*, W. van Hoeve Ltd, the Hague and Bandung, 1959, p. 86
increasing number of fundamentalist Moslems of modern times, Indonesians are traditionally tolerant of homosexuality. Indonesia is a secular state, not an Islamic republic like neighboring Malaysia, and there are no laws prohibiting consenting homosexual behaviour although generally speaking, homosexuality is still a private matter not readily displayed.

Despite this public reticence, a striking example of institutionalized homosexuality in Indonesia is that of the *bunci*. These are men who service other men by providing oral sex. They dress and make-up as women while working but are usually married family men who, from their point of view, practice an honorable and ancient profession. The *bunci* suggest that the profession evolved during the Dutch colonial rule when many “Belanda” far from home and without European women available, made use of their services. More probably, this is a bit like the Indians blaming the British for importing homosexuality into India: one suspects this is a much more ancient custom than the Colonial period, indigenous and sanctioned by Hindu if not Moslem lore. Most *bunci* quote one of the most revered characters in the Javanese shadow puppet theatre, the *wayang*, as justification for their cross-dressing: the hero of the Ramayana, Arjuna, while he was in exile was forced to spend a year as a woman. Whatever the origin, the *bunci* are respected: while I was there in the late 60s, the governor of Jakarta, Ali Sadikin, who was then tipped as a likely future president, was their official patron.

**Homosexuality and the Qur’an**

Like the Bible, the Qur’an contains many references which have been interpreted as referring to homosexual acts. Some, such as *Sura 4:20-21* refer to adultery, but men having sex with men or women having sex with women is construed as adultery. So, for example, if two men

> “…… … commit it, then hurt them both; but if they turn again and amend, leave them alone, verily, God is easily turned, compassionate.”

Compassionate or not, Verse 24:2 calls for a man or woman guilty of adultery to be flogged 100 times.

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4 This actually means “Dutch” but also more generically means “white men”.
Several Suras, variously 7, 11, 26, 27 and 29\(^5\) re-tell the story of Lut — better-known perhaps to us as Lot in Genesis 19 of the Hebrew Scriptures/ Old Testament — and the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which they attribute to the bisexual proclivities of the men. But it is not the Suras of the Qur’an which are the most damning of homosexuality but the Hadith, the reported sayings of the Prophet. So, for example,

"Homosexuality, moreover, is an abomination and a grave sin".
"Allah curses the one who does the actions of the people of Lot."
"If a man comes upon a man then they are both adulterers."
"If a woman comes upon a woman, they are both Adulteresses".
"When a man mounts another man, the throne of God shakes."
"Kill the one that is doing it and also kill the one that it is being done to."

In modern times, some countries take these admonitions literally and apply the death penalty as prescribed by several schools of Shari’ah law. For example, the most conservative school of jurisprudence, the Hanbalite school, awards death by stoning as the punishment for homosexual acts. However, exactly how death sentences should be carried out has been a bit of puzzle for fundamentalist Islamic administrations. For example, the Taliban army in Afghanistan\(^6\) carried out 10 public executions of convicted homosexuals. They debated for a time whether this should be done by throwing the condemned from a tall building or by digging a hole next to a wall, putting the prisoner in it and then toppling the wall upon him. They apparently settled for the latter…. 

\(^5\) Sura 7:80-84; Sura 11:78-81; Sura 26: 162-168; Sura 27: 55-57 and Sura 29: 28-31

\(^6\) Ironically, there are rumours that the Taliban came to power because two war-lords were fighting over a boy; they called in Mullah Omar to mediate and he took advantage of the situation to gain power.
for homosexual offences, according to the International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) include Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen and perhaps the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Even in more liberal countries, homosexuality cannot come out into the open. Cultural anthropologist Bahira Sherif\textsuperscript{7} writing about homosexuality in Egypt, summed up the situation:

\begin{quote}
Islam condemns male homosexuality and popular culture further reinforces this message. In reality, homosexuality is widely practiced but is divided into two categories: the active versus the passive partner. The active partner has little stigma attached to him, or at least much less than to the khawal or passive partner, who is heavily stigmatized.
\end{quote}

In a rather horrible paragraph in \textit{The Seven Pillars of Wisdom}, TE Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") described homosexuality among the men under his command in the desert during World War I:

\begin{quote}
The public women of the rare settlements we encountered in our months of wandering would have been nothing to our numbers, even had their raddled meat been palatable to a man of healthy parts. In horror of such sordid commerce our youths began indifferently to slake one another's few needs in their own clean bodies—a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless and even pure. Later, some began to justify this sterile process, and swore that friends quivering together in the yielding sand with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort..
\end{quote}

Contrast this rather jaundiced view of a life-time ago with a recent one by a journalist, Bill Strubble\textsuperscript{8} writing for a gay life-style magazine, "DNA":

\begin{quote}
In the Central Gardens in Amman in Jordan there are thousands of men. They lean against the stone walls puffing on cigarettes, lie together chatting on the grass and stroll arm in arm through the twilight.........As I wander among the clusters of men, they check me out. They flash ready smiles, some saying hello, the bolder ones beckon me over. ........ If your preference is for swarthy men with
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{8} Strubble, Bill: \textit{In the garden of Allah}, “dna” magazine, June 2003 pp55-61
dark eyes and bushy moustaches, you've arrived in the Sodomite's Garden Of Delights: the Islamic Middle East………

……….. In my travels through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Palestine, Turkey and Egypt I've discovered that it is often the less educated men — the street vendors, labourers, soldiers, policeman and country folk — who are more likely to find sexual gratification with other men. These people are less likely to have been exposed to the influence of Western sexual labelling.

The sociologist Stephen O Murray⁹ says that
The apparent tolerance for homosexuality in Islamic societies depends upon a widespread and enduring pattern of collective denial in which the condition for pursuing either age-stratified or gender-defined homosexuality is that the behaviour never be publicly acknowledged.

Elsewhere in his article, Strubble quotes one of his informants, a Saudi Arabian man, Nabil, who said that despite the criminal status of homosexuality in that country,

"It would be fairly unusual for a boy to not have had anal sex by the age of 15 or 16. In Saudi Arabia there’s a word wiri’ahm meaning young comfort boys. An older boy, generally between 18 and 22, might have sexual relations with a 13 to 15 year old, buy him gifts and carry around with him photos of his love,"

Another informant, Edward, who was then living in Egypt but has also lived in several other Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, explained that there are good practical reasons why older boys have sex with younger boys:

"A 15-year-old girl has lots of baggage. You could be accused of rape, she could get pregnant, she might tell her family and you’d have to marry or her brother’s might avenge her. A boy is simply far safer.

"Arab men see an ass as an ass," continues Edward, "and getting off is not necessarily connected to the gender of the person willing

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to be penetrated. What's attractive to Saudis is youth and softness, regardless of gender. A younger boy is preferable to an older woman. It's the softness of an effeminate, weak man that has the power to attract. The ones who go after masculine men are usually the ones who are gay-identified."

This last point is an important one: Dennis Werner, when describing the biche/bofe model in Brazil commented that globalization was changing the way upper-class Brazilians saw homosexuality, shifting their expectations towards the Western construct of “gay”. Even in war-torn Baghdad, men with beards are already seeking out other men with beards and of adult years. One of the men I sometimes “chat” with on the Internet is a teacher who defines himself as a “bear”. He has a lover, slightly older than he, but they do not live together because his lover is married and lives with his wife and family. Although traditionally Arab men live in the parental home until they marry, Ali has his own flat, conveniently in the same white-collar suburb where his lover lives; they see each other every day and often the lover sleeps over… This is a long-term relationship: they met when Ali was 24 and he is now in his late 30s. His partner is older, in his early fifties and like Ali (and most Bears) somewhat over-weight and hairy. While this seems to be a new development in Iraqi homosexual culture, it is pertinent that Ali insists it is he, the younger man, who is the “top” in their relationship and has always been so. Significantly, he does not consider this makes his partner any less manly: it is “just the way it is between us”.

Dance of a bacchá (1905-15)

But homosexuality in the Arab world was not always like this. In traditional societies and in historic times, just about every variation imaginable on the homosexual theme has been widely and fairly openly practiced in the Middle East. For example, in Central Asia along what was once the Silk Route, adolescent boys and even young

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adult men who have retained a youthful appearance have traditionally also worked as dancing boys or bacchá. While many were professional entertainers, many too were prostitutes. There have probably been boys dancing and selling their youthful bodies here since trade along the Silk Route began. Journalists and coalition soldiers posted to Afghanistan not only affirm the age-old homosexual culture still exists there, many too exclaim how often they themselves are propositioned. A common explanation is that this was the route followed by Alexander the Great!

Much further west is the Oasis of Siwa which was also visited by Alexander the Great and by both Allied and German armies during both World Wars. One of the oldest settlements known to man, the Lake of the Oracle has long been considered sacred so, when men of Rommel’s Afrika Corp went skinny dipping in it, no one was surprised when they were defeated not long afterwards….. Apart from visiting heroes with their armies, however, Siwa remains very isolated and local custom changes very slowly. Here, perhaps as a way of preserving a sustainable population in this arid outpost, traditionally men did not marry until they were forty years old, so it is not surprising that boy marriage was the norm here until well into the second half of the 20th Century.

Pederasty in Central Asia
Siwa was not alone in institutionalizing boy-marriage. Forms of such committed relationships between youths and adult men were commonplace in Central Asia. The most famous example was the love between Mahmoud of Ghazni and his slave, Ayaz, the Sultan becoming “a slave to his slave” because he loved the youth so deeply. Much folklore has grown up around these two men and their relationship. The following is

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11 560 km west from Cairo
12 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexual#Middle_East_and_Central_Asia
an example of a story commonly told to demonstrate the younger man’s devotion:

Mahmoud and Ayaz

AYAZ AND THE CUCUMBER
One day the Sultan and Ayaz were sitting together eating lunch. The sultan cut a slice of cucumber and gave it to Ayaz, who ate it with relish. A little later he gave another slice of cucumber to Ayaz and took one himself. But when Mahmud bit into the cucumber, he immediately spit it out as it tasted terrible — chalky and bitter. He glared at Ayaz and accused him of tricking him into eating the foul vegetable by pretending it was delicious. Ayaz answered, 'No, my sultan. It was delicious to me. I have received so many wonderful things from your hand, that whatever comes from you is sweet to me.'

In 1021 the Sultan made Ayaz king of Lahore, a city which Mahmoud had recently captured. Ayaz re-built the city and established it as a renowned centre for art and poetry. His tomb can still be seen in the Rang Mahal centre of Lahore.

That remarkable traveler, Richard Francis Burton, in his Terminal Essay to his translation of The Arabian Nights, comments that

"The Afghans are commercial travellers on a large scale and each caravan is accompanied by a number of boys and lads almost in woman’s attire with kohl’d eyes and rouged cheeks, long tresses and henna’d fingers and toes, riding luxuriously in Kajawas or camel-panniers: they are called Kuch-i safari, or travelling wives, and the husbands trudge patiently by their sides."

Even more recently, almost three-quarters (72%) of truck-drivers in North Pakistan who took part in a AIDS Analysis Asia survey claimed they had sex with other males even though sex between men is strictly illegal and potentially a capital crime in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This area,
the North West Frontier Province famous in Kipling’s stories of the days of the Raj, adjoins Afghanistan. Here, the ethnic Pashtun men of both countries are famous for taking boy-lovers.

Miranda Kennedy\textsuperscript{13} writing in Open Secrets

\textit{Ruled by an alliance of six Islamic parties who recently declared Sharia to be supreme over Pakistani national law, the NWFP is one of the most religiously conservative regions of Pakistan. This is the province that helped give rise to the Taliban, and where Al Qaeda leaders -- including Osama bin Laden -- continue to seek refuge, according to the Pakistani government.}

\textit{Yet this is also the region of Pakistan where homosexuality is most tolerated -- however quietly. Among the Pashtun majority, having a young, attractive boyfriend is a symbol of prestige and wealth for affluent middle-aged men. Indeed, Pashtun men often keep a young boy in their hujra, the male room of the house that the wife rarely enters.}

Kennedy also says that:

\textit{Sex between men is also commonplace in Pakistan’s gender-segregated madrassas, or religious schools, where students and mullahs will go for months without setting eyes on a woman. Here, more than anywhere else in Pakistan, the situation resembles that found among prison inmates, where sex is mostly about availability and dominance rather than preference.}

One of the problems of Western journalists’ reports of boy-marriage in this part of the world is that they often conflate this ancient custom with pedophilia and almost always assume it is exploitative\textsuperscript{14}. While there can be little doubt exploitation does occur (as much by impoverished parents as by so-called “wealthy middle-aged men”), there is also little doubt that love-matches do still occur, even despite the draconian laws. An

\textsuperscript{13} The Old Town Review, August 2004. This report originally appeared in The Boston Globe. Miranda Kennedy is a journalist based in New Delhi. She reports frequently for the US National Public Radio. The Old Town Review is online at \url{http://www.fluxfactory.org/otr/kennedyopensecrets.htm}

\textsuperscript{14} See Brian James Baer in Gay and Lesbian Review (March-April, 2003) where he says of many such reports that “their subtext was clearly aimed at discrediting the Pashtun tradition by equating it with the ultimate American taboo, adult sex with minors.”
example was reported by Peter Foster in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for October 7, 2005 under the heading, *Afghan tribesman faces death for wedding to teenage boy*. Foster reported:

*A Pashtun tribesman who fell in love with and "married" a 16-year-old boy faces summary execution in Pakistan after his "unholy union" provoked outrage among Islamic leaders.*

*The "marriage" between Liaquat Ali, 42, and the teenager, Markeen Afridi, was conducted with all the ceremony of a conventional tribal wedding, including a troupe of singers and a feast.*

*But guests who arrived at the village of Nangrosa in the Khyber Agency, 80 kilometres north of Peshawar, said they were scandalised to discover the "bride" was a boy.*

*Millat Khan Afridi, 56, [a] tribal elder, said he would advocate the death penalty for the pair because they had held up the reputation of Islam and the tribe to ridicule and contempt.*

*It is also common practice in such disputes for tribal delegations to march on the homes of the offending people and set them ablaze as a warning to others.*

Another problem inherent in many Western reports of Pashtun boy-marriages is that journalists often reduce long-term and loving relationships to “crude sexual bargains”¹⁵ Even our term, “boy marriage” reduces the institution to an exploitative one. Contrast this with accounts like the one called “*Ashnas and Mehboobs - An Afghani Love Story*”¹⁶.

This is the story of Sadar (not his real name) who lived in Afghanistan until he was 19. When he was 14, an older man (he was 35) came into the shop where he was sitting and offered to buy Sadar a cup of tea. After that, they continued to meet, going on long walks together…

*Sadar found a lot that he liked in the man. “He was tender,” he says. “He would ask me if I needed water or anything all the time. He was protective of me and encouraged me to study. He had*

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¹⁵ The term is from Brian James Baer, *op.cit.*
been a second father to me. Better father than my own because he didn’t judge me.”

Sadar, it seems, was rather effeminate and was constantly criticized by his father. One evening, after they had been seeing each other for about two years, his friend invited Sadar to dinner and during the evening, approached him sexually:

“I did expect that when I went there that night,” says Sadar. “I was in love with him by this time, you see.”

He says he fell deeply in love with the older man because he “loved me and kept me close.” When asked whether their relationship was remotely sexual for those first two years, Sadar says “No. I did have sexual feelings towards him but nothing happened. I suspect he desired me as much but never showed it.” And so the older man became Sadar’s mehboob (lover).

The older man continued to give gifts to Sadar and the couple kept having sex for the next three years. He says everyone was aware of their relationship and no one questioned them about it. “People figured it out before I did,” he says, laughing. “You just don’t talk about those sorts of things, though, so I didn’t know.”…

When asked if his friend was single and whether they would like to live together, Sadar replied:

“He was married... He had a wife and three children. He was devoted to his family.” Then I ask him whether he ever entertained the idea of the two of them settling down together. “Well, that doesn’t exist in our culture,” he says. “I was really happy to see him three or four times a week.”

Persia in its Glory Days

In Iran — when it was still Persia — from ancient times, homosexuality was tolerated in all kinds of places, including taverns, bathhouses, coffee houses, military barracks, monasteries and seminaries. Even male brothels were officially recognized (and of course, taxed) during the Safavid era, 1501-1723 AD.

One of the greatest forms of poetry in Persia and later, in Moslem India, was the ghazal. The name, in Arabic, is said to copy the cry of the
gazelle, a beautiful and graceful animal to which youths were often compared in the poetry of the time. This is a set form which, as with the sonnet in Western literature, must follow certain rules. Traditionally, a ghazal deals with love, but as in many of the poems composed and sung by the Troubadours in Europe, a love which is both illicit and unattainable. The Iranian historian Ehsan Yar-Shater says that

"As a rule, the beloved is not a woman, but a young man. In the early centuries of Islam, the raids into Central Asia produced many young slaves. Slaves were also bought or received as gifts. They were made to serve as pages at court or in the households of the affluent, or as soldiers and body-guards. Young men, slaves or not, also, served wine at banquets and receptions, and the more gifted among them could play music and maintain a cultivated conversation.

However, in ghazals and in much of the other poetry of the Persian court, this love was conceived as a longing for oneness with Allah. Even when it was not cast on a spiritual plain, the poets when praising beautiful boys had to watch their language and remember the admonitions of Islam: as the Imam Sufyan At-Thawri (died in 783 AD) warned "If every woman has one devil accompanying her, then a handsome lad has seventeen." And, as the Prophet himself said in Hadith, "He who loves and remains chaste and conceals his secret and dies, dies a martyr" and thus is taken directly to Paradise.

So, the poets of Baghdad came up with a compromise, claiming it was OK to look and even reveal your inner feelings such beautiful young gazelles aroused, but it was not OK to quench your thirst from the youth’s cup. This is a rather different approach to “impure thoughts” from the contemporary Medieval Christian view! An example of such poetic revelation is this whimsical little piece by the master of ghazal, Hafiz i-Shirazi, called “In the Bathhouse”

In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden by trousers
Are revealed to you,
All becomes radiantly manifest.

Feast your eyes without restraint!
You see handsome buttocks, shapely trim torsos,
You hear the guys whispering pious formulas to one another
(“God is Great!” “Praise be to God!”)
Ah, what a palace of pleasure is the bath-house!
Even when the towel-bearers come in
And spoil the fun a bit.

Hafiz is also quoted as saying:  
*I have estimated the influence of Reason upon Love and found that it is like that of a raindrop upon the ocean, which makes one little mark upon the water's face and disappears."

A collection of ghazal written by Hafiz called “The Divan of Hafiz” is so highly respected it is often said to be second only to the Qur’an. An excerpt which appeals to me is Ghazal 10\textsuperscript{19} from that collection:

\begin{quote}
His mop of hair tangled, sweating, laughing and drunk,
Shirt torn, singing poems, flask in hand,
His eyes spoiling for a fight, his lips mouthing “Alas!”
Last night at midnight he came and sat by my pillow.
He bent his head to my ear and said, sadly,
“O, my ancient lover, are you sleeping?”
\end{quote}

Despite the official view “Look but don’t touch”, the consummation of such pederastic love was commonplace. Take for instance, the fragment called \textit{For a pretty seller of cucumbers} by the 14\textsuperscript{th} Century poet, Muhammad al-Nawaji bin Hasan\textsuperscript{20} who was so pious he was commonly called \textit{Shams al-Din} (“Sun of Religion.”). Note in this too another metaphor which, like “gazelle”, was common in Persian poetry of this kind:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Abu Nuwas (ca. 756-ca. 810)}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Ghazl No. 10 from the \textit{Divan of Hafiz}
\textsuperscript{20} Muhammad al-Nawaji bin Hasan bin Ali bin Othman (1383?-1455)
God! How beautiful, this young
Cucumber seller, and a face to make
The sun itself blush at noontime.

The day he agreed to a tender meeting
I was overwhelmed.
Ah, how I savored
That mouthful of cucumber.

But the most shocking, irreligious and boastful of his sexual conquests — and, as many claim, the greatest of all the Persian poets — was the enfant terrible of Baghdad of his day, the libertine poet Abu Nuwas (750?–813?).

Abu Nawas wrote witty, erotic songs celebrating male love, especially the love of an older man for a beautiful boy. He might even have been the first Persian poet to write about masturbation which he considered inferior to the love of boys but better than marriage! Most often he writes of the saqi, the Christian boys who served wine at the taverns and in this he was often the inspiration of later poets, including the one we know best, Omar al-Khayyam.

Nawas’ poems vary, from the irreligious through the sentimental to the down-right bawdy. For example,

Always I have and will
Scatter god and gold to the four winds.
When we meet, I delight in what the Book forbids.
And flee what is allowed.21

Or in provocative mood:

For young boys, the girls I’ve left behind
And for old wine set clear water out of mind.
Far from the straight road, I took without conceit
The winding way of sin, because [this horse]
Has cut the reins without remorse,
And carried away the bridle and the bit.22

And in definitely more bawdy vein:

21 Diwan Abu Nuwas, 62, after Kennedy, p. 220
22 A Boy Is Worth More Than a Girl; after Monteil, p. 91
22 Tu’atibu-ni ‘ala Surbi Stibahi; after Kennedy, p. 262
A gentle fawn passed around the cup
Delicate of waist and slim of flank,
“Will you be on your way, come morn?” he chirped.
“How can we bear to leave?” came the reply.
He glided among us and made us drunk,
And we slept, but as the cock was about to crow
I made for him, my garments trailing, my ram ready for butting.
When I plunged my spear into him
He awoke as a wounded man awakes from his wounds.
“You were an easy kill,” said I, “so let’s have no reproaches.”
“You win, so take what you will, but give me fair reward.”
So after I had placed my saddle bag upon him he burst into song,
“Are you not the most generous rider ever, of all Allah’s creatures?”

Here, Abu Nawas both flaunts and upholds custom: in the sexual
economy of the time, it was not the done thing to pay for one’s pleasures
with money but with a well-turned verse or two. Here, the incorrigible
“Father of Curls” pays the youth — and write a verse!

It is a shame we have to read this poetry in translation: the original must
not only have been incomparably better, but was also written in
calligraphy as glorious as the “scorpion-black curls” on the heads of the
“gazelles”. But we would still most probably be selling the poetry short in
our modern-day understanding of what the poet achieved with his verse.
As an example, there was an old Pubjabi fragment — I think Kipling
recounted it first in Western literature — which said (in translation):

There is a boy across the river
With a bottom like a peach;
But Alas! I cannot swim!

I liked this so much I have quoted it several times in my own writing,
usually trying to tease my readers with its simple salaciousness. Now,
older and wiser (or better read) I realize this was one of these double
entendres to which the Persians and their comrades writing in Urdu were
prone. This is a metaphysical proposition, that we mere mortals can
never attain perfection except in union with Allah. There are truly
gazelles at the bottom of His garden……..

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23 Tu’atibu-ni ’ala Surbi Stibahi; after Kennedy, p. 262