

# NHH14. Gazelles In the Garden of Allah Homosexuality in the World of Islam

WC 3959



*There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is His messenger<sup>1</sup>*

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 split in two almost from the moment of the death of the Prophet when his followers fell out over who should succeed him. One group wanted Ali, the husband of his daughter Fatimah,<sup>2</sup> while the other elected Abu Bakr, the father of the Prophet's favourite wife, to the Caliphate. Of these, the Sunnis, the followers of Abu Bakr, now make up the majority of Moslems (about 800 million world-wide). They are called "sunnī" because they accept as part of their Faith a number of pronouncements which 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahadah> (NB: colours inverted from original white on black)

<sup>2</sup> The "Caliphs" were the successors to the Prophet Muhammad. During the Ottoman rule, they were called "Sultans".



*Al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina, The Prophet's tomb is beneath the green dome<sup>3</sup>*

On the other hand, the Shiites, the descendents of those who chose Ali, 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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.



*Ayatollah Khomeini returning to Tehran in 1979*

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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*".

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad> (Public domain)

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries with mostly Sufi merchants and sailors who traded with the north coast of the island.<sup>5</sup> Their mystical interpretations of Islam appealed to the Javanese who, until their conversion, were mystical Hindus and before that, mystical Buddhists and animists.

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"<sup>6</sup>, 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. 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 several references which have been interpreted as referring to homosexual acts. Some, such as **Sura 4:20-21** refer to adultery, but homosexuality is construed as adultery for which the punishment (*Verse 24:2*) is to be flogged 100 times. Several Suras, variously 7, 11, 26, 27 and 29<sup>7</sup> re-tell the story of Lut — better-known perhaps to us as *Lot* in Genesis 19 of the Old

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/s/sufism.html>

<sup>5</sup> See Vlekke, Bernard HM: *Nusantara – A History of Indonesia*, W. van Hoeve Ltd, the Hague and Bandung, 1959, p. 86

<sup>6</sup> This actually means "Dutch" but also more generically means "white men".

<sup>7</sup> Sura 7:80-84; Sura 11:78-81; Sura 26: 162-168; Sura 27: 55-57 and Sura 29: 28-31

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 Lut."*

*"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.

Estimates vary as to how many people convicted of homosexual offences have been executed in Iran since the Ayatullah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution of 1979, but a conservative estimate would place the number at least at 4,000. Other Moslem countries which apply the death penalty 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<sup>8</sup> writing about homosexuality in Egypt, summed up the situation:

*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.*

A rather less academic account was given by journalist, Bill Strubble<sup>9</sup> writing for a gay life-style magazine, "DNA" in 2003:

*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*

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<sup>8</sup> Sherif, Bahira: *The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*, Volume I - IV 1997-2001 Edited by Robert T. Francoeur at <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/IES/egypt.html#6>

<sup>9</sup> Strubble, Bill: *In the garden of Allah*, "dna" magazine, June 2003 pp55-61

*among the clusters of men, they check me out. They flash ready smiles, some saying hello, the bolder ones beckon me over. .... 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. Murray<sup>10</sup> 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.*

*"What's attractive to Saudis is youth and softness, regardless of gender," continues Edward. "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<sup>11</sup>, when describing the *biche/bofe* model in Brazil commented that globalization was changing the way

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<sup>10</sup> Murray, Stephen O. & Roscoe, Will: *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, New York University Press, New York, 1997, ISBN 0814774687

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 used to “chat” with sometimes 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. This is a long-term relationship: they met when Ali was 24 and he is now in his late 30s. 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 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. 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!

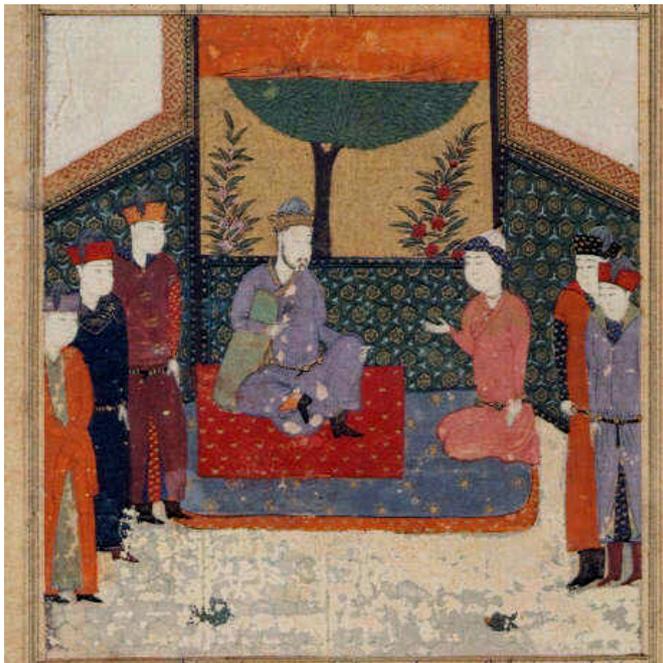


*The Oasis of Siwa*

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<sup>11</sup> Werner, Dennis: *On the Evolution and Cross-Cultural Variation in Male Homosexuality* at <http://www.redel.com.br/~dennisww/homosexual.htm> — Translated from: *Sobre a evolução e variação cultural na homossexualidade masculina*.

Much further west<sup>12</sup> 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<sup>13</sup>.



*Mahmoud and Ayaz*

### **Pederasty in Central Asia**

Siwa was not alone in institutionalizing boy-marriage. Forms of such committed relationships between youths and adult men were common-place in Central Asia. The most famous example was the love between Mahmud of Ghazni and his slave, Ayaz, the Sultan becoming “a slave to his slave” because he loved the youth so deeply. In 1021 the Sultan made Ayaz king of Lahore, a city which Mahmud 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 *Kuch-i safari*, or *travelling wives*, youths who accompanied Afghan traders, riding in camel-paniers, dressed in women's attire with *kohl'd eyes and rouged cheeks, long tresses and henna'd fingers and toes* while *the husbands trudge patiently by their sides*.

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 Pastun men of both countries are famous for taking boy-lovers.

<sup>12</sup> 560 km west from Cairo

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexual#Middle\\_East\\_and\\_Central\\_Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexual#Middle_East_and_Central_Asia)

Miranda Kennedy<sup>14</sup> writing in *Open Secrets* says that in this, one of the *most religiously conservative regions of Pakistan*.

*.....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.*

Apart from being propositioned, a problem for Western journalists is how to report the boy-marriage which is still practised in this part of the world but which they often conflate with pedophilia and almost always assume is exploitative<sup>15</sup>. Sometimes it is, but there is also little doubt that love-matches do still occur, even despite the draconian laws. Take for example, the 2003 story called *Ashnas and Mehboobs - An Afghani Love Story*<sup>16</sup>.

This is the story of Sadar (not his real name) who lived in Afghanistan until he was 19. When he was 14, a man of 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. The youth grew to like the man, especially because, unlike his father, he did not judge him for being effeminate.

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. Sadar, who had fallen in love with the older man by then, said he had been wanting this to happen even though his friend had never once in those two years showed his own desire. And so they became lovers with Sadar playing *Ashna* to his *Mehboob*. 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 whether they would like to live together, Sadar replied that his friend was married and devoted to his wife and three children. Men living together like that, Sadar explained, just did not happen in their culture. But, he said, "*I was really happy to see him three or four times a week.*"

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<sup>14</sup> *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 <http://www.fluxfactory.org/otr/kennedyopensecrets.htm>

<sup>15</sup> 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."

<sup>16</sup> by Afdherejama : *Trikone Magazine* on 6 June 2003.

## 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<sup>17</sup> 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 bodyguards. 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 plane, 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*"<sup>18</sup>

In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden by trousers  
Are revealed to you.

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<sup>17</sup> Yar-Shater, Ehsan. *Persian Poetry in the Timurid and Safavid Periods*, Cambridge History of Iran. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986., pp.973-974.

<sup>18</sup> Hafiz of Shiraz — Khwaja Shams ud-Din Hafiz-i Shirazi, 1326-1390. Translated out of the Arabic by Geoff Putterbaugh, 2004. See also <http://www.thesongsofhafiz.com/>

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."*

Despite the official view "Look but don't touch", the consummation of such pederastic love was commonplace. Take for instance, the fragment called *For a pretty seller of cucumbers* by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century poet, Muhammad al-Nawaji bin Hasan<sup>19</sup> who was so pious he was commonly called *Shams al-Din* ("Sun of Religion."). Note in this too another metaphor which, like "gazelle", was common in Persian poetry of this kind:

*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 Nuwas (ca. 756-ca. 810)*

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

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad al-Nawaji bin Hasan bin Ali bin Othman (1383?-1455)

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, 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.<sup>20</sup>*

And in definitely more bawdy vein:

*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?"<sup>21</sup>*

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 —

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<sup>20</sup> *A Boy Is Worth More Than a Girl*; after Monteil, p. 91

<sup>20</sup> *Tu'atibu-ni 'ala Surbi Stibahi*; after Kennedy, p. 262

<sup>21</sup> *Tu'atibu-ni 'ala Surbi Stibahi*; after Kennedy, p. 262

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. The only perfect gazelles are at the bottom of His garden.....

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