

## Homosexuality

By Gulay Ozcan - 2010

Throughout history, homosexuality has been a part of human sexuality in many civilizations. While it has been glorified in some, like the antique Rome, as a symbol of aesthetic-erotic mentality, in others, it's been approached with tolerance if not encouraged. The first documented same-sex relationship dates back to the early Greek period. During the Roman Empire period, sexual relationship between men was permitted. Caligula had even legalized and taxed both homosexual and heterosexual prostitution. The Warren Cup, a unique silver dinner cup which depicts acts of homosexuality, belongs to the same period. It had to be hidden from sight to avoid destruction by Christian authorities. In Japan, homosexuality was widely practiced among the Samurai's for heterosexuality was considered as a sign of weakness and femininity. While in Japan, the younger partner was expected to make the first move, in antique Greece, it was supposed to be the older partner. Royalty and noble people would surround themselves with the sons of their courtesans. In the Middle Age, Chinese homosexuals enjoyed great freedom while their European counterparts were being tortured. Same-sex love was cherished in the Chinese art; unfortunately, we can see only some of the once plentiful statues, books, and paintings. Although they share the same roots, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have had different approaches to homosexuality at different times. The nationalist movement among the Jews after their settlement in Palestine has marked the sexual behavior seen among their neighboring cultures as a taboo. While the Middle Eastern Muslim culture had an equal and tolerant view on homosexuality, with the western effects of modernization, it has later become a crime, sometimes punishable by death. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mauritania, Northern Nigeria, Sudan and Yemen are some of these countries. Especially in Arabic countries, homosexuality is rejected

and banned as it's considered against religion and degrading the moral values. I believe it is punished by death because it is considered the authority of religion and faith. Today, it is the Western countries where gays and lesbian rights are championed, but until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans, who had then controlled the Islamic geography, had provided a much tolerant environment for homosexuality. It is curious that it was during the period of westernization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when homosexuality began to be oppressed in the Ottoman Empire. In a strange contradiction, while the Western culture's conduct became softer and more rational on the issue, the Eastern culture, which has historically been more tolerant, took over, in the name of westernization, the manners the West had already started abandoning. With the public now thinking along the doctrines of the West, homosexuality became a social issue, and was even considered a degenerate trait of the West. As a matter of fact, the West has created with its own hands the radical East it criticizes today. The inhabitants of Istanbul who complain about the transvestites around certain areas and crying that moral values are recently gone are quite wrong to think that old days were any different. There is no difference at all between the acts or so-called perversion of yesterday and today; it is the same people, interest and practice. The change is only in what used to be performed overtly is now performed covertly, and the emergence of transsexuals with the advancement of plastic surgery and medicine. Tendencies which never needed to be hidden in the past periods are now disapproved, and therefore, lived undercover. Divergent men and women have been there all along during the Ottomans. The state sometimes condoned and at other times banned homosexuality, but the prevailing practice was to let anyone do whatever pleased them. Interest in the same sex was considered odd, yet this did not require any concealing of such interest. Most of the famous poets have written odes to their juvenile lovers. What used to be somewhat customary became disgracing after the 1840's when Ottomans

decided to become a part of Europe and started implementing their reforms. Cevdet Pasa, a prominent name of Turkish history and law, talks about this situation in his 1860's work "Maruzat" (Information). He states that female lovers were now in abundance, whereas juvenile lovers were almost extinct. The traditional love and interest in Istanbul towards juveniles was now directed towards girls.

In recent years, due to their ideological obsessions, some people have criticized about the oppression of gays during the republic era in Turkey, but little do they know. Turkey is the only Muslim country where homosexuality is not banned. While the reality of the Ottoman period is apparent and speaks for itself, in today's Muslim countries, where oppressive regimes rule in the name of religion, homosexuals face varying lengths of prison time and sometimes even death penalty for their deviance. The homosexuals of Turkey, on the other hand, know quite well that despite all hardships they owe much to the founders of the republic. The issue causing the hardship is not the republic, but rather the interruptions in the gains, which had to be advanced and improved, of the republic. Of course, this fact should not mitigate the hardship these people went through. Until the 1980's, homosexuality has been completely neglected in Turkey. Yet, homosexuals only started getting their rights after they started becoming visible. It should also be noted that gay rights in the West, which a Turkish homosexual could only dream of, have become what it is only within the last 30-40 years. For example, homosexuality was legally prohibited in 1989 in Australia, where same sex marriage is now being discussed. What made this progress possible in Western cultures is also the increase in the visibility and discussion of the subject.

Today, same sex marriage is legalized in certain states of the US (New Hampshire, Iowa, Massachusetts, Vermont and Connecticut), and in other countries, like Netherlands, Belgium,

Spain, Canada, Norway, Sweden and South Africa. In 31 states, same sex marriage is voted as illegal. Especially religious people reject the idea and deem it as derogatory. Discussion topics on this issue are economics, health considerations, and religious perspectives, among others. Many churches that help the society in terms of finding jobs, adopting children, etc. refuse to help same sex couples. Many Christian groups actively try to ban same sex marriage, opposing the normalization and legalization of the concept. They claim rights like marriage and child adoption encourages homosexuality and makes it appealing. Most orthodox Jews similarly oppose the idea of same sex marriage for political and religious reasons.

Both among Jews and Christians, there have been incidents where people condemning homosexuality with harsh penalties turned out to be homosexuals. In fact, most homosexuals reject or hide their true identities in fear of public reaction, and live a masked life. What I've observed in such men of religion also manifests itself in men of state. Senator Roy Ashburn, who opposed same sex marriage in California and condemned homosexuality harshly during his speeches, was taken into police custody for DUI after leaving a gay bar with his male friend.

In terms of health issues, AIDS is obviously the main concern. The term gay community brings AIDS in mind for AIDS was widely seen during the increased visibility of the gay community. Research shows that heterosexual relationships are as much to blame as homosexual relationships in contraction of AIDS. Homosexuality is neither a disease nor a disorder; many gay and lesbians live happy, healthy and productive lives.

Another discussion topic is how same sex marriage is going to affect education. Those in favor claim such education will enable children to be more open minded, teaching them about different family structures, while those against it claim it will bring down traditional family structure and

weaken parents' authorities. American Anthropological Association states that research shows no difference between same sex and heterosexual couples in terms of their respect for the elderly and social responsibilities. Another research in Denmark states that in 15 years marriages will increase while divorces will decrease among same sex couples. Sweden and Norway have shown similar track records following the legalization of same sex marriage. These statistics show that same sex marriage does not have any negative effects in terms of social life. The only significant finding is that same sex partners divorce twice as much compared to opposite sex couples in the short term.

Similar researches spanning 25 year periods also show that there is no difference in the children raised by same gender parents or heterosexual parents. The genders of parents have no bearing on the emotional, behavioral or psychological development of their children. There has been no evidential support that opposite-sex parents raise their children better. Still, there have been requests from that states not to support same gender parents. There are claims that the children of same gender parents will grow to become gay, lesbian or bisexual. Although adoption of children by same gender couples is still widely discussed, many countries, among which are Andorra (2005), Belgium (2006), Denmark (2009), Iceland (2006), Netherlands (2001), Norway (2008), South Africa (2002), Spain (2005), Sweden (2002), United Kingdom: England and Wales (2005), Scotland (2009) and Northern Ireland (unclear), Uruguay (approved in 2009, not effective yet), have legalized it. In many others, it is allowed under judiciary supervision.

I am a single mother trying to deal with the impacts on my son of not having a father around. Even this situation creates many intricate issues, and I would have thought having same sex parents would create even more issues for their child. There would be many questions to be answered and it would be hard on both the parents and the child. This was my thought until

recently, yet I now see that had I been really close to this type of situation, if I had same sex couples with children around me, my thoughts would have been much different. If homosexual marriage were legal everywhere and children were adopted by these same sex parents widely, I wouldn't have had such a prejudice. In a way, it is a discrimination which is no different than racial discrimination. Although I have always been liberal and enjoyed the company of same sex couples, I had never really met one who raised their own children. The conditions we face form our opinions, or cause their lack. I now come to look into the issue even more liberally, and see that having same sex parents is not much different than having any two parents. As long as both parents can perform as role models, enjoy the time they spend with their children, teach them values and prepare them for the life ahead, they are no less parents.

Almost all research reveals that sexual orientation is not a situation an individual can choose to change. Hormonal activities prior to and during birth and genes are considered as main factors in determining such orientation. Environmental factors play only a minor role. The studies involving twins and children from very early ages reveal that upbringing has almost no bearing on sexual orientation. Even the number of older brothers a male child has seems to be an important effect on whether he will become gay or not. The exact reason for becoming a homosexual is not entirely or precisely known, but it is thought to be hormonal, genetic or both. In fact, what makes it an issue is the social environment. It is simply one of the three sexual orientations. Any treatment to change such orientation is not ethical and does not stand a chance to be successful. People usually realize they are homosexuals during adolescence, but due to homophobia around them, most reject their true identity and even try to force themselves into liking the opposite sex. In Turkey, homosexuality is still considered a taboo. Only recently a small group of people have come to accept homosexuals. As a better statement, while

homosexuals somehow exist in the society, there are still many people who hate them enough to apply physical abuse or even kill them. This same group of people still believes homosexuality is a psychological disorder that should be treated. The environment of relative comfort and understanding that started in 1990's is now changing for the worse following the practices of the conservative state administration, hence increasing the social and political oppression on the gay community.

Lack of sufficient education, religious and moral pressure, political corruption, insufficient practice of democracy, and patriarchal history, culture and family\ and the social life in general in Turkey don't allow for true freedom for homosexuals. Most of the time, these people cannot even come out of the closet and tell their own parents about their sexual orientations. In certain parts of Turkey, they are mostly excluded from and sometimes being beaten or even killed by their families. Revealing their identities have life-altering consequences. In the past years, the published pictures of two police officers caused them to immediately resign from their positions. Perhaps they were coerced into resignation. On paper, there is no written rule that bans or punishes being gay, but social and religious pressure have caused these people to conceal their identities.

Turkey is perhaps among the "rejecting" countries in terms of its approach towards homosexuality. In such societies, sexual roles are clearly segregated, and any feminine behavior of a man has its repercussions. Showing behaviors attributed to the opposite sex are considered homosexual. To take it a step further, in macho societies, the active partner may even represent male dominance and only the passive partner is considered homosexual. In Turkey, the generic homosexual are prostituting roadside transvestites, male singers with very heavy make-ups, and feminine looking young men with tight jeans. Most people refrain from going to gay and lesbian

bars, and parents don't want their children to become friends with these people. As a contradiction, the same people don't shy away from a standing ovation for homosexual artists and singers. For example, Bulent Ersoy, perhaps the most well known Turkish transsexual, was adored by many to the extent that people cry out during her concerts. Many people even pity her, saying she couldn't control her urges, and that it's not in her hands. Even her marriage to a young man 20 years her junior was easily accepted by the entire society. Yet, these same people contradict themselves when they learn about the homosexuality of their close relatives and start pressuring them to change. In this sense, homosexuality is acceptable only when it doesn't involve them or people around them. In Turkey, since 2006, there is a striking change of fortune for homosexuals, but it's for the worse. In a large metropolis like Istanbul, many public baths, movies and bars attended by gays and lesbians for more than 20 years are being closed down one by one. Other large cities like Izmir and Ankara are going through a similar progress. Since 2007, there has been a steady increase in the number of homosexuals who have claimed to be abused in the hands of the police force. Police are now constantly raiding gay bars. It is also reported that undercover police officers patrol the parks where homosexuals frequently visit. Newspapers and TV stations apply unspoken censorship to popular homosexuals who once were an endless source for tabloids. Singers who were once known for their homosexual appearances all of a sudden started wearing tuxedos. Because of the provocative take of the TV's, transvestites and transsexuals are now fined if seen on the walking the streets. The increase in such homophobic discourse in a society becoming more and more conservative has cast aside the hope of the last 15 years and left a deep pessimism for its homosexuals. Homosexuals are once again refraining from exposing their identities. They not only fear losing their jobs, like the two policemen, but also fear losing their lives in such a hostile environment. Men's greatest fear

during choosing what to wear is looking like gay. In a newspaper, an article tells us about how a boy is beaten by other for wearing an earring. The patriarchal society dictates that male children cannot be emotional, elegant or feminine. Men don't cry, they are supposed to be powerful. Therefore, gay people are considered to be weak, defected and clumsy first by their families, then by the society. While the society is so much against them, it is impossible for Turkish homosexuals to live as freely as their western counterparts, and exist in society with their true identities. About two weeks ago, Selma Aliye Kavaf, minister of the state in charge of family and women, created a new controversy for having said "Homosexuality is a disease, and it needs to be cured." Many journalists and Islamic institutions gave full support to the minister. Yet, it was another Islamist, Hidayet Tuksal, from Ankara University's Faculty of Theology, who offered his sincere perspective on CNN Turk, a national TV channel. He said "Islam doesn't approve of homosexuality, and there are verses in the Koran about the issue. As a Muslim, I don't approve of it either, yet, I also don't approve of treating homosexuals as diseased people. If some people consider themselves as homosexuals, I am supposed to respect their choices." Hidayet Tuksal is among a minority of people who actually respect homosexuality. The society in general believes homosexuality degrades moral values and reject or cast out such people. Although our laws do not provide for any outright discrimination of homosexuals, every now and then LGBT associations are either closed down or deterred from opening on the basis of objecting society's moral values.

Homosexuality has always drawn a lot of controversy. It is now considered on the rise and, therefore, is still the subject of attack in many countries. This is actually not true. It has always been there, the environment for homosexuals, however, has now changed. In western cultures, leniency is becoming understanding, and understanding will become equal treatment. Since this

process is now evident, homosexuals now come out of their closet more freely and more come out every day. The oppression continues in eastern cultures, but with time, that should also change. These people are not much different than us. They aspire and thrive for a successful, happy and healthy existence. How is that different from us?