



A Sinner in Mecca: A Gay Muslim's Hajj of Defiance

Parvez Sharma

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Sharma's spiritual search is intimate and careful, and ultimately one of understanding.

Given the perception that the Middle East is largely hostile to the LGBTQ community, Parvez Sharma's spiritual memoir *A Sinner in Mecca* is shocking in its clarity and candor.

A Sinner's world is a complicated one, with frankly written accounts of anonymous hookups, the use of the Grindr app, and gay-friendly chat rooms that skirt the boundaries of places where conservative Islam dominates.

It includes stories like that of an unnamed and powerful "Saudi prince" going into a gay hotspot looking to score, while also describing an almost quixotic quest to distribute a documentary exploring gay life in the Muslim world. Sharma's is a book about faith, too, that grapples with a tradition that prompts some to kill in God's name.

Sharma's search is ultimately one of understanding. He looks to understand sexuality in a broader scope than conservative religious tenets allow. The book's revelations, large and small, are related with near-breathless intimacy, reading like a collection of stories told in hushed tones, with one eye cast over the shoulder to watch for authorities.

Harsh images, such as of a grisly beheading, are juxtaposed with Sharma's husband's text messages of love and support coming from a world away. The book's closeness culminates with the hajj itself—millions of pilgrims, hellish heat, and intense religious expression.

Sharma describes the experience in the same intimate tones that are the hallmark of the work. The close vantage point makes it no easier to understand where concepts like "sin" and "sinner" begin, end, and fit into the pilgrimage.

With its heavy questions—is the greater sin two men in love, or a system that leads to casual violence toward them?—Sharma's is a spiritual memoir tinged with political and religious overtones.

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