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Novel *Zamel*

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From *Sodomita* to *Omosessuale*: Social and Cultural Transitioning in Franco Buffoni's Novel *Zamel*

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Abstract: The study of social and cultural transitions that directly affect sexual minority rights is becoming more pertinent, especially because an increasing number of societies are making their way through a post-closet era. There is a body of research on coming out narratives emanating from individual perspectives and experiences but the coming out of societies features less in research agendas. This article aims at contributing to this area of study by focusing on collective efforts that work toward more equitable cultures and societies. It engages with the social novel "Zamel" (Buffoni 2009) to study multiple factors that enable shifting definitions of sexual minority rights. In particular, we focus on the role of religion in social and cultural transitioning by examining the historical shift from an era that considered homosexuality an aberration to a time when people belonging to sexual minorities could live without fear or punishment.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Equality, Coming Out, Social Transitioning, Coming In, Zamel, Franco Buffoni, Masculinity, Social Justice Education

Introduction

Existing research on the social adjustment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people and their family members often draws on their individual perspectives and personal narratives about coming out (e.g., Adams 2010; Subhi and Geelan 2012; Baptist and Allen 2008; Broad 2011; Cassar and Grima Sultana 2017). There has been less research on transitional processes that cultures and societies undergo to achieve gender equality and guarantee the same rights to all citizens irrespective of their gender identity and sexual orientation. This article aims at contributing to this area of study by focusing on collective efforts that work toward more just and equitable societies for persons belonging to sexual minorities. We engage with the social novel *Zamel* (Buffoni 2009), written originally in Italian, to study possibilities for change in societal expectations, norms and legislative frameworks that not only benefit LGBTQI+ persons but society in general. The focus of the article is specifically on cultural and social transitions and how these are fundamental to the establishment of LGBTQI+ rights. Cultural and social transitions refer to shifts at a macro level that bring about long-term and continuous processes of radical change in societies. We deem the topic of cultural and social transitioning important because individual coming out and positive social transitions that affirms gay rights mutually affect one another (Cassar and Grima Sultana 2018). The article also interrogates the role of religion in cultural and social transitioning as articulated in *Zamel*. The role of religion is also examined in this regard and in relation to how it contributes to "the Hetero-Nation" (Hayes 2000). In *Zamel*, Buffoni (2009) draws on Michel Foucault's historical analysis of social processes that changed the way homosexuality has been viewed (Foucault 1978), in particular the shift from "sodomita" (sodomite) to "omosessuale" (homosexual). This refers to the transition from an era when being homosexual was considered degenerate, illegal, immoral, and an aberration (Wilson and Cariola 2020), to a time when gay persons could simply live freely and express their sexual preferences without fear or punishment.

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Numerous studies document the adverse effects of discourses that have pathologised homosexuality and equated it with immoral or illegal behaviour (Wilson and Cariola 2020). LGBTQI+ persons are more likely to be victims of social exclusion due to their sexual orientation, and more prone to suffer stress, depression, and suicide and a decline in self-confidence and self-esteem across different parts of the world (Adelson, Stroeh, and Ng 2016; Roffee and Waling 2016). In the United States parental and family rejection of LGBTQI+ persons constituted 20 to 40 percent of the almost two million homeless young people (Ray 2006). LGBTQI+ persons were also more likely to report moody behavior, anxiety, and substance use disorders and being rejected because of their sexual orientation (Haas et al. 2001). For an increasing number of LGBTQI+ persons in the United States the closeted life is, however, becoming less significant, especially for those whose coming out is marked by smooth and straightforward personal transitions due to higher visibility and acceptance of sexual minorities (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). Although an increasing number of societies are making their way ahead through the post-closet era (Dean 2015), there are still societies grappling with homo/trans/intersex phobia, violence, and discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons (Katz-Wise and Hyde 2012).

Institutionalized religions may have a negative effect on the life of LGBTQI+ persons. Despite of the fact that Cassar and Grima Sultana speak about the support of “gay-friendly priests” (Cassar and Grima Sultana 2016), religion is often closely linked with antigay prejudice, which is fueled by what Cerbone and Danzer speak about the representations of homosexuality as “unnatural” (Cerbone and Danzer 2017). Religion influences attitudes regarding homosexuality (Perry and Whitehead 2016; Rowatt et al. 2006; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Burdette, Ellison, and Hill 2005; Schulte and Battle 2004). The basis of Western sexuality rests upon Judeo-Christian doctrine, patriarchal rhetoric, and puritanical teachings (Seidman 2001). Homosexual activity is condemned by a number of world religions, which have persistently viewed it as sinful and unlawful and consequently advocate its restraint (Kubicek et al. 2009). Consistent engagement with religious literature and frequent interaction with religious friends are likely to instill anti-homosexual sentiments (Scheitle and Adameczyk 2009; Olson et al. 2006). In Italy, Catholic LGB persons reported experiencing more stress than Italian nonreligious LGB persons (Lingiardi, Baiocco, and Nardelli 2012). However, when citizens are confronted by religious sentiments that lead to homophobia heterosexism and injustice, they can still negotiate social influences in ways that liberates them from oppression, marginalization, and public humiliation (Cassar and Grima Sultana 2016).

Background to the Novel

Buffoni, an Italian author, poet, and activist, born in 1948, describes his upbringing as turbulent due to his relationship with his strict father, who rejected his homosexuality (Buffoni 2006, 2016). Buffoni’s first poems were published in the late 1970s, when he had not yet made his coming out public. Buffoni employed irony as a technique in his poetry to hide his gay identity. His family and friends knew about his homosexuality, but in professional circles he kept it private as he feared that it could somehow have negative repercussions on his career (Gnerre 2012). Buffoni criticized the academic world as being prejudiced toward homosexual persons (Gnerre 2012).

Buffoni carried out post-doctoral research in Scotland, France, England, and Germany and was exposed to various European cultures. He considers his experiences abroad as having enriched and broadened his horizons (Petrosino 2010). Being away from Italy made his coming out easier. In 1967, England decriminalized homosexuality and two years later Buffoni continued his studies there. In his co-authored book *Come un polittico che si apre* [Like a Polyptych that Unfolds], Buffoni, stated that in England he tasted freedom due to the more

liberal attitude toward homosexuality (Buffoni and Corsi 2018) and that every time he returned to Italy he had to go through a phase of “re-adaptation” (Buffoni and Corsi 2018).

Buffoni’s first references to his coming out are found in *Scuola di Atene* [School of Athens] (Buffoni 2008a). Later he made his coming out public in a more daring way through a collection of published poems in the book *Il profilo del rosa* [A Rose’s Contours] (Buffoni 2000). According to the Italian critic Massimo Gezzi, this “is one of the most beautiful Italian poetry books of the last twenty years” (Buffoni 2012, v).

Through his writings, Buffoni seeks to promote gay rights and equity (Buffoni 2013). He considers writing a part of his activism and believes that literature is fundamentally important for establishing social justice (Buffoni 2013). Being an “activist” signifies being passionate about one’s cause and sustaining hope for a better future that requires social change on a large scale (Ryan 2016). Buffoni has also taught English literature as a full-time professor in various universities in Italy. His thinking has been influenced by the British Enlightenment philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and also by philosophers Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, as well as the famous nineteenth century Italian poet, prose writer, and philosopher, Giacomo Leopardi. The main theme of his writings is social justice with a focus on the marginalization of LGBTQI+ persons. Buffoni has repeatedly expressed his concern about the lack of civil rights and liberties in Italy with regards to LGBTQI+ persons (Russo 2009).

Male and female same-sex sexual activity has been legal in Italy since 1890. Yet a decade ago, public discourses related to queerness still seemed to be generally, according to Pustianaz, “absent” in this country (Pustianaz 2010). More recently Italy occupied the thirty-fifth place among forty-nine European countries with respect to LGBTQI+ rights (ILGA Europe n.d.). Civil unions for same sex couples in Italy were legalized in 2016, but according to Iacovone there is still opposition and backlash regarding equality:

Although it is true that in Italy a number of networks and queer movements are emerging strongly, the spreading of traditional movements, the political weight of the Catholic Church and the “anti-gender” crusades, as well as the atavistic inertia and indifference of the Italian political class to the LGBTIQ reality, [place Italy] as the tail light in comparison to other countries in the West, when it comes to the advancement of minority rights. (Iacovone 2017, 352)

Queer studies in Italy have been generally, according to Bini, “absent” (Bini 2013) and according to Pustianaz, “invisible” (Pustianaz 2010). According to Gertasio, there has been a certain “belatedness” on gay and lesbian Italian literature (Giartosio 2004). In Italian academia the significance of queer studies as an object of research is often shadowed, particularly because of a divisive cultural and political climate. There are difficulties surrounding the study of sexualities within the Italian academic context because of “reasons related to the specificity of the object being studied...as well as a general political and cultural hostility” (Rinaldi 2012, 709). Recently, however, there has been a growing body of research on LGBTQI+ people in Italy, even in English (Pistella et al. 2016; Baiocco et al. 2015; Lingiard et al. 2012). This gradual shift is occurring in spite of the rise of the far right movement in Italy (Trolani 2018).

It is possible that we might have derived meanings from the texts of *Zamel* that were not intended by the author or we might have even made incorrect assumptions. In line with Derrida’s frame of mind, we acknowledge an “enigmatic relationship” between the author of the work as “an insider” and us as “outsiders” in our interpretation of *Zamel* (Derrida 1976, 70). Although “there is always the possibility of the message going astray” (MacLure 2003, 117), our positionality is in line with Buffoni’s plea in favor of social equality and inclusion. Our interpretation of *Zamel* is considered a validation of the voice of LGBTQI+ persons and is intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of gay cultures and surrounding contexts.

The Making of *Zamel*

Buffoni lived in Tunisia for a number of years. He was profoundly affected by the beauty of this country and wrote an anthology of poetry with the title *Noi e loro* [Us and Them] as a result (Buffoni 2008b). According to Gezzi, the poems deal with “the enchantment of the European homosexual with the Maghreb” (Gezzi 2012, xxiv). Despite the prevalent suppression of LGBTQI+ rights in the Maghreb region that includes Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, a number of Maghrebian novelists tackled themes on marginalized sexualities and sexual subversion and imagined sexual liberation (Hayes 2000). The notion and exotic setting of the Maghreb fascinated lesbian and gay writers, who used their writings to express sexual subjectivities happening, in the words of Atwood, “elsewhere” in cultures that in some ways were regarded more liberal and permissive of queerness (Atwood 2012). In Tunisia Buffoni became familiar with the notion of *Zamel*. The story outlined in *Zamel* (Buffoni 2009) is also set in Tunisia. The term “*Zamel*” is the Arabic word for the “passive homosexual,” as understood in Maghrebian culture and similarly defined in Muslim culture in general (Buffoni 2009). In the Maghreb region, the significance of “*Zamel*” was adopted from the ancient Greek world, which made a distinction between the “active” and “passive” homosexual. This referred to sexual positions during sex (Dover 1978). The active homosexual is the one who anally penetrates his partner, while the passive homosexual is the one who is penetrated. In the male homosexual community, only the active role was valued, since the passive role was assumed by women and slaves. Even at present it is considered degrading for men to adopt the passive role (Dover 1978; Buffoni 2009). “*Zamel*” is also a derogatory and denigrating term that implies sexual deviance. According to Rebucini, *Zamel* is “the giver, he who gives his body and who, above all, makes himself dependent...not a type of man” (Rebucini 2013, 402). In the Muslim world the concept of the “active homosexual” is inexistent (Buffoni 2009, 154). By default all gay men are therefore labelled “*Zamel*.” There is no undoing of this label as “the *Zamel* is the one who is screwed [*sic*] and when one is *Zamel* his identification as such remains forever” (Buffoni 2009, 154).

The story of *Zamel* (Buffoni 2009) is set in the year 2009 and starts with Edo who is living with Aldo, his Italian friend, in the latter’s home in Tunis. Buffoni narrates that Edo is just emerging from “a beautiful relationship which lasted five years and which unfortunately ended badly. He therefore is in need of some other diversion, to seek something else, and decides to visit his friend Aldo in Tunisia” (Buffoni 2009, 73). Aldo has a male lover, Nabil, who eventually assassinated him for having called him *Zamel* during a brief conversation after they had sex (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni explains that Nabil kills Aldo “on account of that disgraceful epithet, *Zamel*” (Buffoni 2009, 23). During the court proceedings, after being arrested, Nabil confesses that he killed because of a word, “that ‘ignominious’ word, *Zamel*” (Buffoni 2009, 23). Nabil is imprisoned for twenty years (Buffoni 2009). Rifling through Aldo’s library, Edo comes across a number of books about homosexuality. Buffoni tells us that these books had a negative impact on his friend, as “all the literature that Aldo owned in the years of his formation would lead him to believe that he is sick” (Buffoni 2009, 22). One of them was *Omicidi: Gli omosessuali uccisi in Italia* [Homicides: Homosexual Persons Murdered in Italy]. This nonfictional book, written by Pini (2002), recounts horrific murders that took place in Italy which, as stated by Buffoni, were characterized by a strong sense of “overkilling: the killer infers more than is necessary to kill” (Buffoni 2009, 28).

The novel is mainly devoted to the narration of the epistolary friendship between Edo and Aldo, as it unfolds through their written exchanges. No other significant events after the scene of Aldo’s murder are described. Buffoni reveals that Aldo perceives himself as *Zamel* and as a “*donna mancata*” [effeminate man] (Buffoni 2009, 90). Yet, Buffoni delineates that Aldo expresses his need “to feel as a woman and preferably a slut” (Buffoni 2009, 114) and is attracted to men who secretly enjoy having sex with both men and women, but who do not

accept their homosexuality and are homophobic. It is not specified if Aldo is bisexual and it is never asserted that he had sexual intercourse with women. Buffoni points out that Aldo introjects within himself contempt toward homosexual desires and does not believe in gay civil rights or in social activism, affirming that gays have started “pissing off with all these ‘claims’” (Buffoni 2009, 70) and that gays should “take it up the ass—which is the only essential thing—and be discreet, available and quiet as a *geiche*” (Buffoni 2009, 71). Aldo, who is still closeted, feels a strong sense of contempt toward the idea of coming out as gay.

Edo believes that gay love is possible and that no differences based on sexual orientation exist between loving couples. Buffoni tells us that Edo affirms that “the gay couple is what it is and that’s it” (Buffoni 2009, 91). Edo gives a detailed account of the history of homosexuality, claiming that antagonism toward homosexuality was absorbed in Christianity through Judaism (Buffoni 2009, 122). Edo elaborates:

While in the Greek and Roman context what counted was the erotic impulse—in a Judeo-Christian context, through the writings of Saint Paul, it is the object that drives love, assigning it the status of a ‘project’: a family, children, marriage everlasting. Consequently and primarily, love is seen to be heterosexual and monogamous (Buffoni 2009, 122).

Buffoni continues to narrate that Edo explains to Aldo how through Christianity “a number of legislations were introduced to eradicate homosexuality” (Buffoni 2009, 121). Edo refers to Emperor Constantine who in 342 AD repressed male passive prostitution (Buffoni 2009). Edo also mentions psychoanalytical theory, which affirms that people become gay either because of an authoritarian father or an absent one (Buffoni 2009). Edo, who is Buffoni’s fictional alter-ego, recounts the suffering that gay people went through such as the poets Umberto Saba, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Walt Whitman, and Oscar Wilde. He also mentions gay persons who were subjected to electroshock therapy and other inhumane treatment (Buffoni 2009).

Cultural and Social Transitions in *Zamel*

Using Edo as his mouth-piece, Buffoni narrates aspects of the history of homosexuality by drawing on Foucault’s insights on this matter (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni explains that there have been three phases that marked the social trajectory that gradually led to better prospects for the emancipatory rights of homosexual persons. The first phase, occurring until the end of the nineteenth century, was characterized by repression and punishment for homosexual persons who practiced “sodomy.” During the second phase, which lasted until 1973, homosexuality was pathologized and considered a sickness that required clinical intervention to be cured. The conceptualization of homosexuality as being synonymous with sodomy and defined as pathology was sustained by arguments emanating from natural law theory, which was also endorsed by the Catholic Church (Buffoni 2009). Natural law theory implies that the unitive aspect of sex should be strictly linked to procreation and affirms that the sole purpose of sex is procreation (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni regards this theory as the main source of discrimination for homosexual persons stating that “the prejudice against homosexuals derives from the conviction that a natural law exists” (Buffoni 2009, 145). According to Buffoni, all Abrahamic religions believe in natural law (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni regards natural law theory as being flawed, arguing that “affection, sexuality and procreation are configured more and more as distinct and separate” (Buffoni 2009, 41); adding also that there are different means of how procreation can take place (Buffoni 2009). In *Zamel* Buffoni mentions that Thomas Aquinas, described as “the great repressor” (Buffoni 2009, 100), was one of the prime upholders of this law, who brought it forward with vigor and energy, in line with the Catholic tradition. For Buffoni, the idea of “natural” (Buffoni 2009) is outdated because it cannot be applied to any realm of life. Buffoni explains that when genes were discovered, “the contradistinction of ‘biological’ (related to

nature) and ‘artificial’ (related to science) became obsolete” (Buffoni 2009, 143). Edo asks whether the production of energy, plastic, or electricity can be called “natural.” Buffoni develops his argument further by stating that initially it was believed that animals, which are “natural,” did not practice homosexuality. Buffoni argues that when science discovered that “homosexual” acts also occurred in the animal kingdom, it was then claimed that animals practiced “bestial acts” (Buffoni 2009, 144) and human beings should not imitate them. Buffoni concludes that human beings have progressed in all aspects of life because they have distanced themselves from what is natural (Buffoni 2009).

After 1973, homosexuality was no longer considered a psychiatric disorder. This shift in perspective gradually started giving way to the third stage in the history of emancipatory rights for sexual minorities (D’Emilio 1992). This stage affirms the stable identity of gay persons and therefore reversed the pathologizing nature of homosexuality. With reference to this final phase Buffoni differentiates between “omosessualità praticata” [practiced homosexuality] and “omosessualità come identità” [homosexuality as an identity] (Buffoni 2009, 134). Aldo adheres to the former concept, which refers to sexual acts in a strict sense, while Edo embraced homosexuality at a deeper level by integrating it as part of his identity. “Omossessualità come identità” is characterized by self-acceptance and sense of ownership of one’s sexuality. For Buffoni, the third phase centers around the “diritti da acquisire” [acquired civil rights] (Buffoni 2009, 134). Through Aldo and Edo, Buffoni highlights the fact that some civil societies are still stuck in either phase one or two. In *Zamel* northern European countries are praised for their civil rights and liberties, whereas contempt is shown for Italy, which in Buffoni’s opinion is “the most homophobic country in Europe” (Buffoni 2009, 103).

Enabling Factors toward Cultural and Social Transitioning

In *Zamel* (Buffoni 2009) cultural and social transitions are considered fundamental to the establishment of sexual minority rights that work toward discouraging experiences of oppression, discrimination, exclusion, marginalization and invisibility. Edo develops his conceptualisation of social justice for the LGBTQI+ community and claims that positive social change can be facilitated through the elimination of discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons and the abolition of social injustices. *Zamel* (Buffoni 2009) outlines a number of principles that facilitate social change, embedded in social justice. The first calls for the dismantling of heteronormativity. *Zamel* argues that one cannot assume that every new-born child is going to develop into a heterosexual person (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni mentions Foucault who referred to the dominance of heterosexism as being “mainly defined through what it excludes” (Buffoni 2009, 36). Buffoni advocates different forms of love relationships and families that are not necessarily heteronormative and neither based on stereotypical notions of family life (Buffoni 2009). Additionally, *Zamel* (Buffoni, 2009) calls attention to the need for the appropriate use of language and definition of words. Edo explains to Aldo the meaning of names attributed to homosexual persons aimed at inflicting pain on them and reproducing existing negative connotations. Apart from the term “Zamel,” Buffoni mentions “queer” which for him “is the most derogatory term to indicate someone who is homosexual” (Buffoni 2009, 56). Buffoni also explains that “queer—in comparison to gay and homosexual—is a very radical terminology; it indicates diversity in all of its forms, beyond the binary sex/gender” (Buffoni 2009, 56). The term “queer” was first used to refer to homosexual persons in the late nineteenth century. As urbanization intensified and spread in the United States during the decades that followed, people who were attracted to other persons of the same sex could meet more frequently (Miller 1995). Queer communities were consequently established and were encouraged by left, liberal identity politics (D’Emilio 1992). Buffoni explains that the term “frocio” (Buffoni 2009) used in contemporary Italian language, refers to the horse’s nostrils and is also intended to demean

LGBTQI+ persons (Pustianaz 2013). Language has to adapt itself to the realities of LGBTQI+ persons (Buffoni 2009).

Buffoni calls for societies to embrace the fact that homosexuality cannot and should not be changed. He reiterates that homosexuality is innate and not socially constructed or chosen. Buffoni accentuates that cultural and social transitioning that leads to more equality is also facilitated when society accepts the fact that “the future of [gender] identification lies in the footprint of one’s lips and eyes” (Buffoni 2009, 75). This indicates that gender identity does not depend on physical attributes, genitals, biological structure or appearance, but on the ways, in which persons define themselves. For Buffoni “the moment in which one is asked if one is ‘born’ or if one ‘becomes’ homosexual (or left handed) there is the implicature of a ‘cause’; as in pathologies, in sicknesses” (Buffoni 2009, 40). Buffoni insists that since the American Psychological Association “removed homosexuality from the list of disorders” (Buffoni 2009, 43), “this question has become stupid and irrelevant” (Buffoni 2009, 81) therefore for Buffoni “speaking of a sexual choice is hypocritical, shameful.... The homosexual doesn’t choose anything” (Buffoni 2009, 149). Gay persons could however deny or suppress their sexuality, as in the case of Aldo. Buffoni advocates self-awareness and self-acceptance of one’s sexuality and through Aldo’s character shows the damage of internalized homophobia (Buffoni 2009).

Social justice for sexual minorities is also established when the concept of natural law is abrogated from discourses surrounding their legal rights. Buffoni argues that “We are hardly a natural species anymore and therefore ill-suited to talk about what is natural” (Buffoni 2009, 143). For Buffoni, what should be natural is “the acceptance of education, gentleness, civilisation: ‘humanising the world’ as Rilke used to say” (Buffoni 2009, 143). Buffoni refers to gay parents establishing their own family: “Individuals reproduce as a social group thanks to the common homosexual feeling and to the common homosexual culture. To this, today—thanks to scientific progress—we are able to also add procreation, and thus the idea is that of a homoparental family” (Buffoni 2009, 138). *Zamel* also calls for the curbing of religious influences based on the dictates of natural law that are damaging because they brand homosexuality as unnatural and which are enmeshed with political power. Buffoni explains that as long as the “obsessions” of classifying what is natural and unnatural are discussed within the Catholic Church, “there is no problem,” but when these issues influence the Catholic and fascist members of parliament, the whole of society suffers (Buffoni 2009, 142). *Zamel* makes it clear that in order for social justice to prevail for sexual minorities, natural law and monotheistic religions that promote it should stop interfering in the political sphere (Buffoni 2009).

Another objective mentioned by Edo relates to giving voice to sexual minorities, specifically through their narratives of victimization and discrimination across the centuries. Buffoni, through Edo reiterates that the silencing and repression of homosexuality led to horrific outcomes: “How many cases of insanity, segregation, exclusion, suicide in the past were an outlet for oppressed homosexual sensibilities that were impossible to express?” (Buffoni 2009, 78). For Buffoni, it is a “paradox” that “the story of the whole homosexual culture, of a gay identity...is founded solely on the literary testimony of intellectuals” (Buffoni 2009, 50). Similar to the history of all minority groups, the history of homosexuality should be explained “through the gaze of those people who have always been in a position of subordination, of those who have been colonised” (Buffoni 2009, 50). *Zamel* expounds the history of homosexuality in detail as it occurred in Italy and elsewhere. Additionally, *Zamel* calls for the introduction of sexuality education in schools that not only aims to impart the historical trajectories of sexual minorities but also educate students to respect diversity (Buffoni 2009).

When the recognition that one is being discriminated against is made, Buffoni advises sexual minorities and all those interested in fighting for their rights, to unite and form large communities to support one another and work for civil liberties within a constitutional state to bring change on a large scale (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni believes that activism is an important tool for societies to establish more equality. He advocates participation in “gay pride” and other

public manifestations that sustain the visibility of LGBTQI+ persons and their rights through interventions in cyberspace, television, and editorials in newspapers (Buffoni 2009). In one of his letters Buffoni, through Edo asks: “Don’t you understand that the only way to obtain rights is through the contractual force that is reached when we are many?” (Buffoni 2009, 76). Social activism could potentially lead to positive changes in the legal sphere and provide the shift needed for cultural and social transitioning to occur. Finally, as claimed by Buffoni, in order to establish social justice it is imperative that “all young people are given opportunities to explore possibilities and be able to freely make choices, without any imposition of models and restrictions” (Buffoni 2009, 137). In his letters to Aldo, Edo expresses his wish for Italy to become akin to more civilized and progressive countries like Spain and the Netherlands, which in 2009 had already granted legal rights to same-sex unions. Toward the end of the novel, Buffoni states that “we are born persons and citizens with equal rights and duties” (Buffoni 2009, 126) and clearly affirms that it is important that we keep in mind what sexual minorities endured in the past to understand their realities.

Discussion

The creation of “Zamel” as a discourse was aimed at undermining homosexuality and offending gay persons. The concept of Zamel reduces the sexual encounters between gay persons to physical and erotic pleasure. Being Zamel signifies being seduced and being subjected to carnal instincts that exclude other aspects of relating, such as affection, intimacy, connection, tenderness, mutual understanding, compassion, friendship, loyalty, companionship, and commitment (Rebucini 2013). Being Zamel means being devoid of human sentiments that create love (Rebucini 2013). Stigmatizing labels that associate homosexuality with sexual promiscuity and perversion still persist even in cultures which are not familiar with the notion of Zamel. Homosexuality is still “framed as an exclusively sexual activity; void of emotion; an instance of indulgence in perversion and decadence” (Bryant 2013, 12). Cultural scripts in different countries convey the discourse that gay men tend to focus highly on their physicality, muscularity, and body image and consequently, in the words of Sanchez et al., they are often made to feel the “pressure to be physically attractive, and pressure to appear masculine in order to be accepted by society and to be seen as desirable by other gay men” (2009, 73). Sanchez et al. also state that gay men in general are also portrayed as exhibiting “obsessive gym/diet regimes” and “use illegal substances (e.g. anabolic steroids and Clenbuterol), and experience body distortions as they strive to be and remain attractive” (Sanchez et al. 2009, 80). The “obsession” of gay men to appear very masculine might have been cultivated in the 1970s; Edwards explains that “in the wake of gay liberation, [where] many gay men rejected the effeminate in favor of the hypermasculine” (Edwards 2005, 2). Brown, Ramirez, and Schniering (2013) explain that in line with the notion of Zamel, a number of gay men tend to be dismissive of “monogamy” and opt for “open” relationships, based only, according to Bonello and Cross (2010), on “emotional fidelity” rather than sexual fidelity. Furthermore, in correlation with the notion of Zamel, a study by Kozak, Roberts, and Frankenhauser found out that a number of gay men have a tendency to objectify both themselves and their partner and that gay men “objectified other men more than did heterosexual men” (2009, 228). There is a higher propensity among gay men to separate sex from the emotional aspect of their relations and according to Brown, Ramirez and Schniering “more likely to deconstruct the meaning of sex, engage in sexual encounters without emotional commitment and approach sex as recreation” (2013, 35).

Buffoni presents the character of Edo as one who refuses to identify himself with the label of Zamel. Edo moves away from the perception that gay men are, in the words of Edwards, “often castigated as the wrong sort of men: too masculine, too promiscuous, too phallic, or too lacking in masculinity” (Edwards 2005, 4). Buffoni, through Edo, disowns the connotations of Zamel and rejects its active/passive binary distinction. Aldo and Edo construct their own self-representation according to their respective self-image. Aldo relies on dominant socially

constructed notions of homosexuality, whereas Edo chooses not to be pulled by the real/lesser man duality or by discourses that emphasize the “penetrator/penetrated dichotomy” of sexual pleasure and intimacy. Aldo and Edo’s differing views confirm that “gay men do not constitute a homogenous group, or even a unified category, and their position varies significantly according to such factors as social class, geography, race or ethnicity, let alone individual politics, practices, or preferences” (Edwards 2005, 14). Despite multiple differences among gay men, Edwards claim that the masculine factor seems to be embedded within cultural and social conceptions of homosexuality:

Gay men remain men, with all the perhaps increasingly precarious privileges and benefits that maleness bestows on them. Although these may be both perilous and uncertain, gay men remain related to masculinity, and they cannot and, indeed, should not be understood as separated from it. (Edwards 2005, 14)

The social imperative for men, highlighted by Sanchez et al., to be “super masculine” and to “butch it up to be accepted” (Sanchez et al., 2009, 80) is enmeshed with the concept of Zamel. Navigating the Zamel stereotype is hardly easy, especially when this notion is internalised and taken for granted. Edo challenges the Zamel label and makes his own construction of masculinity, which is, in the words of Kimmel and Wade, “what men think it is” (Kimmel and Wade 2018, 237). He seems to conceptualize masculinity as fluid and as Connell and Messerschmidt see it, “subject to change” (2005, 835).

Edo seems to embrace what Wilson (2015) calls a “two-spirit” identity, which refers to persons who possess both female and male “spirits.” Wilson draws on indigenous American and aboriginal culture to explain that holding this type of identity “may encompass all aspects of who we are, including our culture, sexuality, gender, spirituality, community, and relationship to the land” (Wilson 2008, 193). Traditionally persons considered having two-spirit identities were honored in indigenous societies. Colonization however brought heteropatriarchy to these communities that accentuated gender binaries (Wilson 2015). Additionally, according to Wilson, “the imposition of Christianity” transmitted through mandatory board schooling, regarded gender and sexual diversity as “sinful and threatening” (2015, 2), and consequently the historical belief of two-spirit identities in many communities was repressed through “racism, homophobia and sexism” (2008, 195). This made coming out painful, turbulent, and complex and led to a separation from family and the aboriginal community. Narrative research by Wilson (2008) found out that persons with two-spirit identities in indigenous American and aboriginal cultures go through a process of reflection, which enables them to “take responsibility for and control the meaning of their own experiences and identities” (Wilson 2008, 197) and “come in” to themselves. Wilson states that this process provides them access to “an empowered identity that integrates their sexuality, culture, gender, and all other aspects of who they understand and know themselves to be” (Wilson 2008, 197) and helps them to come to value and understand their relationship with “their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world” (Wilson 2008, 197).

Indigenous understandings of gender that are not limited by binary thinking disrupt ongoing systems that aim to reproduce colonization (Robinson 2019). We draw on Wilson’s perspectives and research to suggest that communities can also experience their “coming in” by embracing and celebrating sexual diversity and transition from systems that are oppressive toward sexual minority groups. We acknowledge that this process could be “messy” and complex. On an individual basis “coming in” is not always experienced after the occurrence of coming out to others. Although a number of LGBTQI+ persons come out, their sexuality might not be fully integrated within themselves because they still have not arrived at actual self-acceptance. They might lack experiences of “coming in to a powered identity” (Wilson 2008, 197). Their coming out might have only been a superficial experience and lacking in conviction.

They might decide to relocate and live far away from their country in order to stay away from their family, friends, or culture (Vasquez del Aguila 2012). They could develop feelings of bitterness toward their religion and toward any form of spirituality. Conflicting sexual identities experienced internally with oneself and in relation to families, communities and institutions one was brought up in, could be resolved when sexuality and faith are both regarded as a gift and a strength in one's life (Deguara 2018; Cassar and Grima Sultana 2018; Cassar 2009).

The concept of "coming in" is useful for the coming out of societies. Edo's defiance of the Zamel stereotype generates a way of thinking that could contribute to cultural and social transitions that destigmatize being gay. Buffoni (2009) implies that subjectivities associated with being Zamel are fluid. Rebutini rejects the dichotomy between an active/passive self in his analysis of what makes a Zamel, arguing the two are intertwined. Rebutini also argues that the attributes of being Zamel could be assigned to "everyone":

Everyone could be a zamel at one time in their lives; no one is excluded from this dishonorable possibility. This passiveness is not an identity, and therefore it does not relegate an individual to the feminine side. There obviously is a shift on a spectrum that has hegemonic masculinity at one end and femininity at the other: the zamel is closer to the feminine side, but this shift is completely relative. On one hand, it is temporally limited, and, on the other, it is only partial. Masculinity, in fact, is not something that can be lost "en bloc" and forever. (Rebutini 2013, 402)

In *Zamel* privilege and normativity are questioned through an examination of how society operates (Buffoni 2009). The degrading characteristics of a Zamel are also adopted in other countries outside the Maghreb. In *Zamel* (Buffoni presents multiple cultural and political arenas in which different values attached to contested masculinities are in struggle, because of heteronormative dominance, that feeds on the oppression of sexual minorities. Heteronormativity is pervasive and institutionalized (Buffoni 2009). Heteronormative dominance "promotes the norm of social life as not only heterosexual but also married, monogamous, white, and upper middle class" (Brandzel 2005, 190). Heteronormativity permeates public policy and enacts and legitimises homophobia (McNeill 2013). Lyotard states that the heterosexual "grand narrative" (Lyotard 1984) privileges a particular story and a distinctive pattern of identifications that supposedly produce a coherent and unified gendered self. The totalizing power of grand narratives and, what Foucault calls "the tyranny of globalizing discourses" (Foucault 1977, 83) hinder social transitions toward equality and justice.

In *Zamel* institutionalized religions generally constitute a serious obstruction to social transitioning and the possibility of social justice for sexual minorities (Buffoni 2009). Buffoni's portrayal of the Catholic Church as oppressive and unjust in this regard, excludes the notion of religious communities that embrace sexual diversity and actively seek to dispel homo/trans/intersex phobia, violence, and discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons that are present both within their circle and outside (Buffoni 2009). While some religious institutions can reproduce and perpetuate inequality, others can serve to unite LGBTQI+ communities and even bring positive transformative change in society. Religious beliefs and practices are entangled with wider social norms in complex ways that mutually constitute each other (Cassar and Grima Sultana 2016). Cassar and Grima Sltana explain that the interference of religion in political arenas is damaging when it works to oppress, but also liberating when it fights for social justice: "Social forces, which strive to integrate traditional and cultural norms with sexual minority rights, function through religious and cultural mechanisms; at times through oppositional ways and at other in accordance with each other" (2016, 1000). Institutionalized religions are also directly shaped by social change and even, as the *Gaudium et Spes* claims, regard it as their responsibility "to read the signs of the times" (Roman Catholic Church 1965, para 4). For example the second Vatican Council had shifted its moral positioning on a number

of social issues, such as the primary scope of the Christian marriage. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* [Joy and Hope] promulgated in the same Council states that “Marriage to be sure is not instituted solely for procreation; rather, its very nature as an unbreakable compact between persons, and the welfare of the children, both demand that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grows and ripen” (Roman Catholic Church, 1965, para 50). The conciliar teaching on the hierarchy of the ends of marriage is however still embedded within a heteronormative framework. Due to different interpretations of the Church’s teachings on sexuality, according to Selling there hasn’t been “theological consensus” (Selling 1982, 30). The official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* issued nearly thirty years after the second Vatican Council continues to insist that: “Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes” (Roman Catholic Church 1992, paragraph 2351). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also claims that it holds on to the tradition, which declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” (Roman Catholic Church 1992, para 2357). A number of religious institutions grapple with internal struggles related to sexual minority rights as they face contradictions in the moral reasoning underlying their claims. These same contradictions could potentially create movement and progress in cultural and social transitioning. The recognition of gay love presents one such contradiction that disrupts discourses surrounding natural law and the rule of law. Foucault teaches that contradictions “shake up” the foundations of religions:

To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there’s the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up. (Foucault 1997, 136–137)

Contradictions make connections possible. Aldo and Edo’s friendship occurs in spite of the different social positioning they adopt regarding their personal embodiment of same-sex desire. This could imply that useful connections leading to cultural transitions between different types of societies are possible, even if they are at various stages of “coming out.” Increased recognition of LGBTQI+ rights worldwide and social pathways that are eschewing the damaging effects of heterosexism are bound to make direct or indirect pressure on societies that have yet to catch up with regards to equal rights for sexual minorities (Seidman, 2001). The factors highlighted in *Zamel* that facilitate cultural transitioning into more equitable social systems for sexual minorities are embedded in social justice and brought about by constant activism, political mechanisms, legislation and comprehensive public policies supported by institutional reforms (Buffoni 2009). Social and cultural change is also brought about by making sense of and giving visibility to personal narratives of dissonance regarding the infringement of sexual minority rights. Buffoni (2009) reminds readers that the path to justice is not always clear, as it is configured within power relations which oppose and contest one another.

Conclusion

Buffoni (2009) emphasizes that in spite of possible tensions, the power of cultural and social transitioning could be harnessed by challenging discrimination and inequality. We propose that the fourth phase in social transitioning would be characterized by societies that operate equality through social mechanisms that do not regard gender and sexual orientation as obstacles. This implies that social solidarity is based on mutual collaborations irrespective of sexual identities. The fourth phase calls on persons pertaining to sexual minorities to move forward and forge new paths in their individual trajectories, even if society has not yet caught up with policy and legislative frameworks that guarantee equal rights. This is similar to the choices Edo makes. He is ready to embrace who he wanted to be and develop his personal ontology accordingly. He does not allow the *Zamel* label to crush him or keep him marginalized. He defies it. Unlike Aldo

who is engulfed in shame, he does not wait for society to change, but takes ownership of his life. The social function of shame acts as a strategy for queer resistance (Sedgwick 2003).

Although Buffoni (2009) generally describes religions, especially monotheistic ones, as obstacles to cultural and social transitions that promote equality, their potential for positive social change cannot be underestimated. The social role of religions could be useful in establishing inclusive communities and social justice. There are various attempts to “construct an inclusive theology that is accepting of homosexuality” and celebrate gay spirituality (Beckett 2013, 384). As Christian theology strives to recognize and embrace its own queerness (Loughlin 2008), the tide of social forces that demand justice are becoming more difficult to resist, urging it to partake in the exploration of possibilities that harness cultural and social transitioning toward equality. Underlying *Zamel* there is a strong calling to hope for more just societies, based on the recognition that communities which strive to commit themselves to social justice necessarily have to make cultural and social transitioning toward equality possible (Buffoni 2009).

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