

Islam in Contemporary Literature

Islam in Contemporary Literature:

Jihad, Revolution, Subjectivity

By

John C. Hawley

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For Federico Antonio Monterroza
“Jaime”

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INTRODUCTION

WHERE IS ISLAM IN OUR DAY?

“PROTECTING THE NATION FROM FOREIGN TERRORIST ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES. By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and laws of the United States of America, including the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), 8 U.S.C. 1101 et seq., and section 301 of title 3, United States Code, and to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States, it is hereby ordered as follows. . . . (Executive Order 13769, January 27, 2017)

“The view from Sudan is that the entire West is one place; tearless, affluent, and all-powerful.” (Aboulela 2000, 177)

On September 10, 2001, an average American would have focused very little attention on Islam, its politics or doctrine, and would still be very vague about its history. There were the pyramids, of course—weren't those Muslim? Those were impressive; and the Taj Mahal, but wasn't that Hindu? And that castle in the south of Spain, that was nice; stolen from Ferdinand and Isabella, as I recall. But the rest was a lot of sand, and unimportant countries—not really countries, at all—that merged together in the imagination, and that didn't have a lot going for them except for that oil, which was important. There were the Crusades, which we obviously won, and one would have thought that would have put an end to the matter. But, annoyingly, it looked like the Muslims weren't going away or converting and becoming team players. They were mostly an irritant (something had to be done about OPEC, for starters) and sometimes worse. In fact, it seemed they were increasingly visible and awfully vocal, what with their protests outside embassies, and the like, and their constant attempts to overthrow their own various governments or spreading everywhere as unwelcome migrants or insisting on wearing clothes that set them apart. Thinking back a few years, there were those fifty-two American diplomats and citizens held hostage in Iran, and it just went on and on for 444 days from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981, as if they wanted to rub President Carter's nose in his inability to do anything about it. Another President might have

bombed them, perhaps; who's to say. A few years later there was that "fatwa"—a new word for most of us—against Rushdie, a *novelist* of all things (1989), so how much trouble could he possibly have been? That was followed by the bombing of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (1998)—this was getting serious. Then one morning in 2001, Americans turned on their televisions and gaped again and again, as the newscasts played and replayed the plane flying into the World Trade Center in Manhattan. One first marveled that some errant plane on its way to LaGuardia had avoided those buildings for so many years (what an odd place to put an airport!), and horrible for those people going to work! But then, the second plane slammed into the second tower—and it was frighteningly clear that something was horribly wrong—something like Pearl Harbor, in fact. We were under attack. What was next! Who was doing this, and why? What had we ever done to anyone that would prompt such insanity, such heartlessness, such vindictiveness? What if there were other planes on their way? So, *this* was Islam! Total madmen; *kamikazes*. We'd seen this before, and we knew the response it demanded. All hands on deck; kill the bastards. Soon enough there was the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 for directing some film about Mohammed, or something; the underground bombing in London in 2005 and the Mumbai railway station that same year; the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 for printing those cartoons (which weren't very funny, anyway, but what's the big deal?); the attack on the Bataclan nightclub in Paris that same year; the car plowing through the people on La Rambla in Barcelona in 2017; and that beheading of the school teacher in Paris for showing students those *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures and discussing free speech (Onishi 2020). These people said they worship God, but it looked an awful lot like they worshipped this Mohammed. Isn't that blasphemy in their religion? And all that intransigence towards Israel ever since the end of World War II. What was *that* all about? Was this ever going to end? What are they so angry about all the time? And how can there be so many Muslims in Bosnia, of all places, and Indonesia, if Muslims are supposed to be Arabs? And what's with the veil—what *century* are they living in? Suddenly, Islam was inescapable—but still, for the most part, *unknown* by Americans, most of whom still saw it as basically an intrusion. As Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon points out, "Before 11 September 2001, neither the Algerian Civil War, nor the oppression of women in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Rwanda aroused the interest of the American mass media" (Zayzafoon 2005, 181).

Meanwhile, if you were one of the few non-Muslim Americans who fraternized with any Muslims, you'd have heard a remarkably different and more complicated set of historical events that seemed significant to

them. How amazing, for example, that the Prophet somehow, no doubt through the grace of Allah, had reformed a disparate and pagan people and united them under one God with almost no bloodshed. How sad that his first descendants argued disastrously over succession and split into two camps that struggle to this day. How remarkable that Allah raised up Saladin, the Mamluks exterminated the invading Mongols in 1260, and the invading Franj were repulsed in 1291 (Maalouf 1984, 246, 258). How glorious that Muslim scholars of The Middle World advanced the sciences and architecture while Europe, apparently a world of peasants, consumed itself in ignorance and disease, and all the while the Islamic institutions of faith and caliphate were expanding across more and more territory. There were the Ottomans in Turkey (14th to early 20th century), the Safavids (1502-1736) in Persia; the Moghuls in India (1526-1857). In the 16th century the world seemed to be increasingly Islamic. But we never conquered Europe, and various forms of decay set in as Western technology and commerce began to dominate. Great Britain and Russia competed in “the Great Game,” at the expense of The Middle World. Westerners in general were pointedly unimpressed by Islamic ideas, supremely confident in their own. Why did they not see the wisdom of the faith? The French bought property in Algeria and ignored the locals. In fact, “by 1850, Europeans controlled every part of the world that had once called itself Dar al-Islam” (Ansary 2009, 246). What had we done to cause this abandonment by Allah? Soon enough, the British foreign minister, Arthur Balfour, put in play a territorial decree that is still festering: “Britain essentially promised the same territory to the Hashemites, the Saudis, and the Zionists of Europe, territory *actually* inhabited by still another Arab people with rapidly developing nationalist aspirations of their own—while in fact Britain and France had already secretly agreed to carve up the whole promised territory between themselves” (Ansary, 298). Within Islamic theology conflicts between Wahabism, secular modernists of the Aligarh Movement, and the followers of Sayyid Jamaluddin-i-Afghan were setting us against each other, and the crisis of modernity was running straight into the atrophy of *ijtihad*, the “thinking through of the implications of scripture creatively” (Ansary 248). Then there was the outrage and shame of Nasser’s defeat by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, which led to a split in Islam between the secularists and political Islamists. Fuel was added to the fire when the United States engineered the overthrow of the democratically-elected Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran, and his replacement by the royal Pahlavi family. The international oil companies did whatever they deemed necessary in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, maintaining strongmen who happily sold national assets. This allowed the West to portray Arabs—and, by extension, all

Muslims—as corrupt and devious. The invasion of Afghanistan by first the Soviets and then the United States provided incentive for a Wahhabi reimagining of a final, brutal, but inevitably triumphant encounter, by whatever means necessary, between Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb. Meanwhile, the West becomes increasingly obsessed with sex, filling their values-free lives with empty titillation and pornography. Their women shamelessly abandon their role as mothers and helpmates and march in the streets to become just like men. Money and acquisition have become the West’s dominant goals in life. This alternative life they offer us Muslims is a secular and meaningless rat race.

Mutual ignorance has long been a defining characteristic of the relations between Islamic nations in “the middle world” and those of Europe and, eventually, North America. Tamim Ansary notes that, just before the Crusades, “to Muslims, everything between Byzantium and Andalusia was a more or less primeval forest inhabited by men so primitive they still ate pig flesh. . . . They knew that an advanced civilization had once flourished further west. . . but it had crumbled during the Time of Ignorance, before Islam entered the world, and was now little more than a memory” (Ansary 2009, 133). That European situation, though, was changing, and was perhaps not noticed in much detail by Islamic nations at the time. As Ansary records, “the consequences of various tiny technological innovations accumulated to a tipping point” (134)—a heavy steel-tipped plow, the horse collar, three-field crop rotation, the rise of towns, an increase in pilgrim visits to Jerusalem and the consequent tales about “the opulence of the East: the gorgeous houses they had seen, the silk and satin even commoners wore, the fine foods, the spices, the perfumes, the gold” (136). When the Crusades began, the absence of unity among Muslims was “breathtaking,” since “the Muslims saw no ideological dimension to the violence, at first. They felt themselves under attack not as Muslims but as individuals, as cities, as mini states. They experienced the Franj as a horrible but meaningless catastrophe, like an earthquake or a swarm of snakes” (142)—“no one seemed to cast the wars as an epic struggle between Islam and Christendom—that was the story line the Crusaders saw. Instead of a clash between two civilizations, Muslims saw simply a calamity falling upon. . . civilization. . . when they looked at the Franj, they saw no evidence of civilization” (148). By contrast, “al Rum” (the Romans, and therefore the Byzantines) looked far better. Furthermore, the Crusaders “never penetrated deeply into the Muslim world” and consequently they “stimulated no particular curiosity in the

Muslim world about Western Europe” (149).¹ This changed by the time of the Renaissance, but the horse, as it were, was out of the barn and there was no stopping it.

The situation in which the world finds itself in the twenty-first century, therefore, is much as Ansary imagines it: “One side charges, ‘You are decadent.’ The other side retorts, ‘We are free.’ These are not opposing contentions; they’re nonsequiturs. Each side identifies the other as a character in its own narrative” (Ansary 2009, 350). Yet, “*Secular* and *Western* are not synonymous, despite what Islamists may declare” (350). Both narratives, while compelling, self-fulfilling, and self-contained for those who adhere to them, are arguably incomplete and mutually destructive, simplistic and deadly, scarring generations who are born into resentment and smug self-confidence. A similar divide exists in academic analysis of the Islamic “side.” Darryl Li argues that “there have been two prevailing approaches in public debates and scholarly discussions about violence and Islam” (Li 2020, 24). He calls the first group lumpers (e.g., Samuel Huntington), because they emphasize the threat posed by “a coherent object called ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims.’” The second group, the splitters (e.g., Edward Said) rejects this “essentialism in favor of emphasizing diversity, particularity, local context: there is no single Islam, but rather many Islams” and violent jihadists, in turning against fellow Muslims, “demonstrate a lack of religious authenticity” (24). The lumpers show a “glaring lack of analytical subtlety and complicity with racist and regressive politics. But the splitters leave

few tools to make sense of the acts of sacrifice that do occasionally take place in the name of Islam between people who seem to lack any other tie of commonality or interest. In this view, the call to jihad can seem only like empty rhetoric manipulated by elites or the preserve of scattered fanatics. Here, anti-essentialism can work invidiously as both wedge and bludgeon, separating “Good Muslims” from “Bad Muslims,” as defined by conformity to the diktats of the United States government. (25).

The violent reaction to the publication of the caricatures in *Charlie Hebdo*, so inexplicable to non-Muslims (and an assault on a value of singular importance to westerners—free speech), and the outraged response to this reaction by non-Muslim Europeans and Americans, are the perfect symbols of intolerance for those on both sides of the event and its aftermath. Any academic discussion of this divide quickly becomes contorted and

¹ The real threat was from the East: “the Mongol Holocaust wasn’t like the Dark Ages of Europe. It didn’t set in slowly and lift gradually. It was a terrible but brief explosion, like the Black Death that swept Europe in the fourteenth century, or the World Wars that wracked the globe in the twentieth” (Ansary 2009, 159).

emotional, and demonstrates the hold that a particular hermeneutical approach maintains.²

The Pew Research Center (Lipka 2017) offers an informed analysis of what the situation *actually* is, outside either narrative.³ Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in the world (between 2015 and 2060, the Islamic population will increase by 70%; Christian by 34%; Hindus by 27%; Jews by 15%; Buddhists will shrink by 7%). At 1.8 million, Muslims are the second largest religious group; by the end of this century, they will exceed the number of Christians. Only 20% of the world's Muslims today live in the Middle East or North Africa. The majority (62%) live in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Turkey. By 2050, 10% of all Europeans will be Muslim. In 2017 there were 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States (that is 1.1% of the total U.S. population). Of that number, 58% are immigrants. By 2050 it will be the second largest religious group in the United States, surpassing the number of Jews. Muslims are seven years younger than the median age non-Muslim. With zero being the coldest and 100 being the warmest response to Muslims from other Americans, Muslims ranked 40 in 2014 (lowest of any religious group), but 48% in 2017. Republicans, white evangelicals, and those with less education responded most negatively to Muslims. Around 85% of Democrats think there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in the U.S. today. According to Pew, in 2017 “most Americans [did] *not* see widespread support for extremism among Muslims living in the U.S.” Overseas, “Majorities in Hungary [72%], Italy [69%], Poland [66%] and Greece [65] say they view Muslims unfavorably, while negative attitudes toward Muslims are much less common in France [29%], Germany [29%], the United Kingdom [26%] and elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe.” The Netherlands and Sweden were both 35%. A 2011 survey revealed that traits associated with Muslims by non-Muslims in the United States, Russia, and Western Europe were (clearly confused): fanatical (58%), honest (51%), violent (50%), and generous (41%). Conversely, traits associated with Westerners by Muslims in Muslim-majority countries were (sadly, more coherent): selfish (68%), violent (66%), greedy (64%), immoral (61%), arrogant (57%), and fanatical (53%). Support for making Sharia the law of the land was wildly popular across Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle-East and all of Africa, and much less popular in Central Asia. Perhaps surprisingly, 42% in Russia thought it should apply in Muslim areas of their country. Views of ISIS were overwhelmingly negative in almost all Muslim countries. “In a few countries,

² See, for example, Saba Mahmood (2009), Danielle Haque (2019, 87-107), Titley et al (2017), Zagato (2015).

³ Also see the Rand Corporation's 2004 analysis (Rabasa et al).

a quarter or more of Muslims say these acts of violence are at least sometimes justified, including 40% in the Palestinian territories, 39% in Afghanistan, 29% in Egypt and 26% in Bangladesh.” A solid majority of U.S. Muslims don’t feel that other Americans see them as mainstream, but they are proud to be Americans and think that hard work will bring success in the country. Though 48% have experienced at least one instance of prejudice in the past year, “55% think Americans in general are friendly toward U.S. Muslims.” Somewhat surprisingly, only 36% of U.S. Muslims say all or most of their close friends are also Muslims, “compared with a global median of 95% in the 39 countries” surveyed by Pew. Again, perhaps surprisingly, “about half of U.S. Muslims (52%) now say homosexuality should be accepted by society, up considerably from 2011 (39%) and 2007 (27%).”

In what follows, I hope to offer various openings onto several parts of a new narrative that is slowly evolving. Among the most effective means towards greater understanding and empathy are the novels that invite a vicarious embrace of the issues at hand—Islam’s perception of its sidelining by modernity, the unsettled role of the modern nation-state within the caliphate, the voice of authority and the place of the *umma*, gender roles, the veil and personal freedoms, the dangers of assimilation, the threat of secularization, artistic creativity versus anathema license, pluralism within Islam and non-Arabic cultures. Who is a Muslim—according to Muslims themselves? How are stereotypes reinscribed by the West? A comparative literary analysis of contemporary novels written by culturally-identified Muslims will seek to demonstrate a diversity of answers to these questions from within Islam. Limited mostly to works available in English (some translated from French or Arabic), the major questions are here provided a seminar for discussion across topics, and so should be helpful in classrooms around the world and prompt further work by students, scholars, and the general public. Through narrative engagement, literature teaches us to question our own assumptions. It can defamiliarize our daily frame of reference, prompting broader empathy, keener social perception, and deeper emotional intelligence. This study of contemporary Islamic fiction and other self-reflection seeks to demonstrate the ongoing crisis in the personal lives of Muslims, in their nations, and in their confrontation with history. Suggesting common questions, the book goes on to differentiate a multiplicity of ways to be a Muslim in today’s world, depending upon one’s gender, one’s upbringing, one’s local history. From Pakistan to northern Africa, from Indonesia to Turkey, these authors confront questions of Islam’s discomfort with its current position of perceived subservience to the West, questions of modernity’s demands on an eighth century religion,

questions of the role of women, of the authorization of those who interpret the religion to the world, questions of violence perpetrated by a religion of peace, questions of failed revolutions against corrupt governments. As Winifred Woodhull argues, though, “it is crucial to acknowledge that intractable difference is at work in . . . social movements—and that intellectuals have a role to play in giving voice to it, without presuming to speak for those whose activities manifest it” (Woodhull 1993, 200). This study therefore presents a chorus of voices—Yasmine el Rashidi, Hisham Matar, Tahar Djaout, Mohsin Hamid, Hanif Kureishi, Edward Said, Driss Chaibi, Kamila Shamsie, Tahar ben Jelloun, Leila Aboulela, Abdellah Taia, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Hisham Matar, and others—who embody the various strains of Islamic interpretation and conflict. Completely accessible to the general reader but informed by academic disagreements, this study presents many of the most interesting authors writing today.

Authority

The issue of authority presents itself as a series of interlocking questions. Who is *allowed* to speak for Islam—who is heard, and in what context? As Scott Kugle writes, “Islam, after all, has no voice. Only Muslims have voices. Only they speak in the name of Islam, and Muslims speak from distinct social and political contexts that shape how they practice and represent their religious tradition” (Kugle 2010, 20). Of course, as Timothy Brennan notes, “the greatest problem [for Westerners] is still being unable to conceive of the colonial as even having a voice that matters” (Brennan 1989, 166). Salman Rushdie puts the issue bluntly:

If the worst, most reactionary, most medieval strain in the Muslim world is treated as the authentic culture, so that the mullahs get all the headlines while progressive, modernizing voices are treated as minor and marginal and “Westoxicated”—as small news—then the fundamentalists are being allowed to set the agenda. The truth is that there is a great struggle for the soul of the Muslim world and, as the fundamentalists grow in power and ruthlessness, those courageous men and women who are willing to engage them in a battle of ideas and moral values are rapidly becoming as important for us to know about, to understand and support as the dissident voices in the old Soviet Union used to be. (Rushdie 1993).

Note that Rushdie published these opinions in the *New York Times* as long ago as 1993, and consider all that has happened since then to demonstrate his point. The “us” with whom Rushdie here aligns himself are, implicitly, those who might draw easy comparisons between, for example, Iran and totalitarian states though could not succeed in the modern world. The

usurpation of voice, to which he refers, draws strength from within Islamic countries and from outside. In the first instance, Fred Halliday asserts that “the conflict is not, as Islamists and their fellow travelers in the west would have us believe, between ‘Islam’ treated as a unity and ‘the west,’ but between different interpretations of Islam and the politics it can allow” (Halliday 1993, 17). On the second point, the West tends to view all of Islam as a mindless juggernaut. In Akbar Ahmed’s words, the ordinary Muslim

Is portrayed as a fanatic over the book [the Qur’an], politically unstable through the dictator [Saddam Hussein] and corrupt by the actions of the Bank [of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI)] . . . Islam [itself], from the time of the Crusades, has been seen as barbarous, licentious, the enemy of Christianity; in our age, in addition, it is seen as anarchic and monolithic. The Islamic peril is now seen by many as the greatest threat to the West, beside which the Red and Yellow perils pale into insignificance. (A. Ahmed 1992, 3)

If, as Halliday argues, “the definition of Islamic belief given by Khomeini, and reproduced in stereotype by those who oppose all Muslims, is disputed within the faith” (19), then one can understand Akbar’s assertion that the ordinary Muslim, while possibly disagreeing with the imposition of a fatwa against a novelist, or despising dictators in nominally Islamic nations, or rejecting the dishonesty of various financiers who call themselves Muslims, nonetheless shares with his brothers and sisters throughout the world of “emerging” nations a certain pride in any expression of power against deliberate incomprehension and manipulation by the Western world.⁴ The frustration prompts cynicism and anger. In Ahmed’s words, the ordinary

⁴ On the specific question of Rushdie’s future, for example, Halliday makes the following (disputed) points: “on at least three grounds the fatwa could be lifted at once. . . . First, fatwas in Shi’ite jurisprudence can be deemed to lapse when the *mujtahid*, the promulgator, dies. . . . Second, in most of the Islamic tradition, legal statements—including fatwas—are only valid for the world of Islam and not in the extra-Islamic *dar al-harb*. Third, just before he died, Khomeini provided the ideal theological mechanism for overriding even the core tenets of Islam, the doctrine that *maslahat*, or ‘interest’ (by which he meant the interest of the state) should prevail over any particular religious injunction” (17). In fact, on September 25, 1998, the *New York Times* reported as follows: “‘The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life of the author of *The Satanic Verses* or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so,’ the Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, said in a statement that he read to reporters today.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/25/world/iran-drops-rushdie-death-threat-and-britain-renews-teheran-ties.html>

Muslim “is also as disgusted as he is confused with his own sense of impotence in shaping reality around him; he can no longer challenge what is real or unreal, no longer separate reality from the illusion of the media” (3). But this compounds the Muslim’s problem of encountering the modern world, since it is also a misrepresentation of Islam: “Will the lampooning and vilification,” Ahmed asks, “divert Muslims from the values of a religion that advocates compassion and balance? And where are these virtues, so much emphasized in the Qur’an, to be located in the present Islamic turbulence? Are the so-called moderates ‘out’ and the so-called extremists ‘in’ as a consequence of this turbulence?” (5).

The political admixture involved on both sides cannot be naively overlooked. George N. Atiyeh, in his concise history of the shifting emphases in book production in Lebanon and Egypt in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, affirms on the one hand that “the literary life of [no] other culture [has scarcely] played such a role as in Islam,” but on the other hand he recognizes that “probably the greatest agonies come from an indirect pressure, the control exercised by religious authorities over the doctrinal purity of any book that might be construed as having even an indistinct bearing upon the tenets of Islam” (Atiyeh 1995, 250). Rushdie himself wrote in October 1988 to India’s Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, after India banned the novel, “Let’s remember that the book isn’t actually about Islam, but about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay” (Fischer 1990, 388). It is reasonable for him to make such a claim because his own imaginative world is secularized: those of many of his harshest critics (though by no means all) are not. If Rushdie’s novel is “really” about migrancy, extremists *and* moderates will recognize that no literary work like *The Satanic Verses* can be read intelligently *without* significant reference to its religiously affiliated characters and mythic structures (could *Paradise Lost*? Could *Absalom, Absalom*?). As Annemarie Schimmel reminds us, “The religious importance of books is reflected time and again in allusions to books by mystics and mystically inclined writers” (Atiyeh 1995, 75). Thus, even if our use of the term “Islamic” throughout this volume often refers less to individual commitment and more broadly to countries that are principally Muslim by religion (and by participation in the historic development and characterization of a global Islamic civilization), the contentious role of the *ummah*, the community of believers, is recognized.

Correct interpretation of “Islamic” literature must insist on the contextualization of indigenous and national literary traditions as they play themselves out in contemporary writing. Moroccan writer Mohammed Choukri, for example, suggests that “there is a vast difference between

Arabic and Western literature. Western literature is more liberated than contemporary Arabic literature, which is still chained to the dark ages. Notwithstanding, classical Arabic literature is one of the most liberated literatures of the world in spite of the oppressive forces that worked against it at certain periods of time” (Ghazoul 1994, 225). This crisis facing many Arab writers, dealing with the dual cultural aftermath of Ottoman rule and a certain form of Islam, is well-expressed by Syrian poet “Adonis” (‘Ali Ahmad Sa’id):

The Arab liberation movements that have emerged until now are nonrevolutionary, whether in their manner of thinking or in their means of struggle. They inherit the past and perpetuate it. The Arab, man or woman, cannot be an effective factor in the struggle without being personally liberated. And he cannot function as long as he is subservient to the culture of the past, as long as he is subservient to the inherited system of social relations, as long as he is subservient to a heritage that has ceased responding to any of the problems which he is confronting. Faced with this situation, the revolutionary Arab poet finds that, on the one hand, he cannot but support these movements in fighting colonialism and imperialism, and that, on the other hand, he cannot but oppose them because of their lack of a revolutionary foundation. (Ghazoul, 30)

A discussion of authorization, therefore, must interrogate the very notion of a modern “Islamic” writer, asking whether there is a set of Islamically-aligned characters or themes sufficient for the definition, or whether there is an Islamic *style* (or styles) of writing. Do, for example, classical Arabic narrative traditions hold sway in experimental Arabic (and, by extension, “Islamic”) novels? On the other hand, can contemporary “Islamic” writing (if it aspires to be something other than writing by secularized former Muslims) align itself with any style other than the traditional demonstration of “the chain of transmission” that Roger Allen has shown to be “a necessary prelude to any narrative that was to aspire to authenticity” (Allen 1995, 213)—to any writing, that is, with *telling* force in Islamic society? And here the question of one’s chosen audience is, perhaps, determinative. Simon During accurately notes that “protests against Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (started by migrant communities in Britain) undercut assumptions about the naturalness (or dominance) of Western notions of how particular cultural formations relate to one another, in particular the Western sense of literature’s transcendence of religion and politics” (During 1993, 17). The accuracy of his analysis cannot be denied.

Pluralism

In *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Tayeb Salih puts in the mouth of one of his less savory characters a central dilemma of a religion whose adherents often seem, to Westerners, to desire uniformity. “What Islam are you talking about? . . . The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren’t they Moslems like us?” (81). Indeed, rather than uniformity an argument might be reasonably advanced that would suggest quite the opposite to this general Western stereotype: with the introduction of print, diversity has become far more expected in the Islamic world. Francis Robnson, for examples, suggests that the change is seen in three steps:

As the twentieth-century progressed. . . [a] new historical consciousness played a central role in enabling Muslims to bring forward alternative understandings of Islam to set beside those of the *ulema*. Now, against their negative vision of Islamic history as a process of constant effort to hold back the inevitable decline since the time of the Prophet, it was possible to set a positive vision which saw that the essence of Islam could be kept vital and pertinent in each succeeding generation; indeed, it might be possible to see it moving towards stages of higher realization on earth as it travelled through time. (Robnson 1996, 84)

A second development associated with the distancing effect of print was the reification of Islam in the Muslim mind—“the growth of an understanding of Islam as an object, which might be analyzed, conceptualized and even presented as a system” (85). And a third element that Robnson more controversially (and with nuance) identifies as print-associated is “the rise to prominence of a this-worldly understanding of Islam” (86-87), by which he means an increasing emphasis on taking action to put God’s will into practice on earth. The relevance of his assertions to our own discussion is the apparent impetus to pluralism within Islam provided by print technology throughout the world. The very vehemence of today’s absolutist backlash would suggest the strength of these centrifugal forces.

Without denying the shared beliefs that transcend national borders, the expression that Islamic citizens of various nations find for their faith and its impact in their culture must be idiosyncratic. As Aziz Al-Azmeh asserts in his remarkable analysis of Islam in the world today, “Like other religions, Islam is not a generic essence, but a nominal entity that conjoins, by means of a name, a variety of societies, cultures, histories and politics” (Al-Azmeh 1996, 60). Or more specifically, as Kenneth Harrow notes, “as concerns Islam in Africa, and its subsequent literary expression, what occurred was a series of adaptations in which Islam came to occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people—psychological spaces, governing first

the territory of the mind, at times motivated by economic or other self-interested concerns, and then larger, external spaces of an increasingly political and social nature” (Harrow 1991, 7). Perhaps this could be asserted for Islam anywhere, as could his further argument that the aspect of the religion that generally finds its strongest metaphorical inspiration in African literature is in its conception of life as a *jihad*—a struggle against one’s inner demons as well as against external evil. Islam should, in no one’s consciousness, be limited to its Arabic manifestations. Analogous to the debate of early Christians over the necessity of male circumcision as the first step in conversion (that is, first become a Jew, and then a Christian), the literary expression of Islam throughout the world at least touches on the debate over whether or not one must, in some sense, become an Arab to become a true Muslim.

Regardless of the anger that seems to fuel much radical fundamentalism, and despite the west’s xenophobic fears of Islamic resurgence, Michael Youssef is no doubt correct in his assertion that “an Islamic development which would combine both moral values and willingness to develop and progress is what most Muslims would welcome” (Youssef 1985, 145). The context in which that assertion of personal values is combined with politics and economics, however, is centrally important (see, for example, Tibi 1987, Dabashi 1993, and Esposito 1984). At the same time, much of this discussion is carried on against a backdrop of variegated postcolonialism (see Moore-Gilbert 1997, 203). Threaded through these discussions are issues of hermeneutics central to questions of authority, gender, and pluralism: where one chooses to turn one’s eyes has always been determinant of one’s *Weltanschauung*, as Plato knew, but this core truth has taken on ironic personal and national implications. Fanon’s experience of being looked at by the colonizer and feeling devalued in the process is classic—“I am being dissected under white eyes. I am *fixed*” (Fanon 1967, 116)—but it is no longer a one-way street. As Ella Shohat points out, “spectators can also return the gaze through critical comments or hostile looks. An active exchange of words and looks, whether in colonial Egypt or India, or present-day Times Square movie theaters, turns public spectatorship into a discursive battle zone, where members of the audience actively negotiate “looking relations”. . . between communities” (Shohat 1994, 348) Gazing out, in contention, from the larger Islamic community to the former colonizer is demanded by postcolonial discourse. Yet *internal* community relations, as expressed in Islamic literature, demonstrate that freedom to look “where one wills” continues to be circumscribed in many Islamic cultures. Fedwa Malti-Douglas points out that Islamic scholars “taking their cue from the Qur’an, have tirelessly warned against the

potentially socially destructive nature of this gaze” (Malti-Douglas 1995, 205), especially in male/female relations. Nawal El Saadawi, in becoming an examining physician, metaphorically confronts this proscription and, in her fiction, presses her point” “The hero of the short story “Death of an Ex-Minister” confesses to his mother that he was driven insane by a female employee’s refusal to lower her eyes in his presence. As the male voices his concerns, he is in fact articulating his gender’s response to the Saadawian reversal of the dominant cultural scopic regime: Saadawian female heroes have the uncanny ability of looking at men, thus disturbing, if not violating, the scopic space” (Malti-Douglas 1995, 206).

All of the questions come together in the personal experiences of those who live in an Islamic context at a time when self-definition is inevitably intertwined with national creation (and reformation). In her expression of the personal confusion and pain that the twentieth century brought willy nilly to her life, Latifa al-Zayyat speaks for many Muslims in the world today. Having written the ground-breaking feminist novel, *The Open Door* (1960), which won the inaugural Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, she some years later wrote that she could not write so hopefully any more: “roads to salvation are blocked; the common ground of shared values seem to break down into multiple different sets of values according to the varied social strata; the common sensibility and its language is no more; people lacking national unity are divided and subdivided until each is turned into an insular island” (Ghazoul 1994, 254). Her comments, with slight variations, might be made by most citizens of the emerging nations of the non-Western world in the twenty-first century. What is more, the historic and immediate role of religion in the creation of national identities emerges as central to the crisis, especially where political questions overtake personal choice. There can be no doubt that Islam’s influence in redrawing these cultural borders continues to be strong and confrontational, and that one “Islamic” nation may be more repressive of its citizens’ individual choices than another such nation. The future contours of one of the world’s major religions is at stake. More immediately compelling will be the accommodations individuals are allowed or encouraged to make—or to resist—in their personal entrance into, and reshaping of, “modernity.” As with similar revolutions throughout history, these freshly-imagined Islamic communities will first be seen in literature.

JIHAD: RESTORING A DISRUPTED DESTINY

Reza Aslan notes that “the fact is that nearly one out of five people in the world are Muslims. And while some of them may share bin Laden’s grievances against the Western powers, very few share his interpretation of jihad” (Aslan 2005, 87). The essays in this section deal with the concept as it has played out in the works of a broad spectrum of writers—Edward Said, Ibrahim Tahir, Tahar Djaout, Slimane Benaïssa, and Mohsin Hamid, cognizant of the reality that, for most Muslims, it is understood as “a *defensive* response to oppression and injustice” (87). The greater jihad means “the struggle of the soul to overcome the sinful obstacles that keep a person from God” (81), and some of these authors demonstrate how that interior spiritual struggle can sometimes be misdirected, as it has been in all the world’s religions.

CHAPTER ONE

EDWARD SAID AND THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE: *THE LAST SKY*

“We have no known Einsteins, no Chagall, no Freud or Rubenstein to protect us with a legacy of glorious achievements” (Said 1986, 17). This humble acknowledgment spoken on behalf of the Palestinian people by one of its most visible apologists now serves ironically as his own epitaph, for Edward Said surely achieved as impressive a position in academia as anyone in the twentieth century, and he now enters the lists of memorable contributors to the human project. One notes that such a sentence, relatively brief as it may be, nonetheless bristles with the combative nature of much of Said’s best ideas—the notion of achievement, of working toward the production of a “legacy,” of intellectual work that serves the role of armor or soldiering. And, of course, behind the creation of such a sentence stands the question of perception, of self-presentation in the world, and of how the world chooses to define an individual or, in this case, an entire people. Edward Said, famous for his groundbreaking work on the portrayal of colonial peoples by their nineteenth and twentieth century masters, was clearly haunted all his life by the curse and the blessing of his own hybridized identity as a Palestinian living abroad and mingling with a world that would have been happy to reward him for quietly ignoring the discomfiting facts of his origins. “For myself,” writes Said,

I have been unable to live an uncommitted or suspended life. I have not hesitated to declare my affiliation with an extremely unpopular cause. On the other hand, I have always reserved the right to be critical, even when criticism conflicted with solidarity or with what others expected in the name of national loyalty. There is a definite, almost palpable discomfort to such a position, especially given the irreconcilability of the two constituencies, and the two lives they have required. (Said 1998, 565).

Self-perception, which permeates his writing on the Palestinians, obviously energizes his broader ethnic concerns because it first presents itself as a personal question: am I, he seems to ask, the person that the western world (or the Middle East, for that matter) seems to think that I am? By extension,

are the Palestinian people as comprehensively understood by their enemies and sometime friends as they might be? How might the world's way of seeing Palestinians be enriched and brought closer to my own experience of my people and myself? What follows is a brief discussion of Said's lifelong struggle with this hermeneutic question: how is one "interpreted" by the larger society, and with what political consequences?

In "Bursts of Meaning," Edward Said's 1982 review of John Berger's *Another Way of Telling*, he remarks that "Berger's project is to distinguish the authentic from the merely successful, and to save the former from the ravages of the latter" (149). One might muse that Said's own work hinges on that observation, and that he himself sought to distinguish the "authentic" not only from the "merely successful" facts of his own academic life, but also from the merely *unsuccessful* self-positioning of the Palestinian people vis-à-vis the world community, and, more pointedly, their homeland. John LeBlanc and Carolyn Medine suggest that "what connects the Palestinian to place—modern things like telephones, planes, etc.—only connect them to the place of exile, not to the place of origin. This creates more than a double consciousness; it raises the question of how to write a legitimate future on what is called an illegitimate history" (LeBlanc and Medine 2017, 60). In *After the Last Sky* Said suggests a course for writing such a future.

Whereas he defends what some saw as Berger's sentimentality, he himself turns a passionate, committed, yet clear eye towards the Palestinian "Question" and recognizes that his people are not simply victims. Said concludes his review with the following caveat:

Two questions are left unanswered by Berger's work. First, can one really undertake aesthetic/intellectual projects in the private sector, so to speak, and then launch out from there directly into politics? Unlike Lukács and Gramsci, Berger fails to deal with the power of ideology to saturate culture. There can be no unilateral withdrawal from ideology. Surely, it is quixotic to expect photographic interpretations to serve some such purpose. The second question is the central one of oppositional politics—what to do? Photography, Berger says, deals with memory and the past. What of the future? Even if he wishes to deal only with cultural politics, *Another Way of Telling* demands a further step which Berger does not take: connecting his aesthetics with action. (152)

The year after he wrote that, Said began to collaborate with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, who had worked with Berger on *Another Way of Telling*. One must assume that he is seeking to connect what he saw as an omission in Berger's collaboration with Mohr, and that *After the Last Sky* would unabashedly use aesthetical questions to enter the realm of politics. Such an

assumption is justified by Said's stated frustration in the book's preface, in which he describes his initial encounter with Jean Mohr. Before *After the Last Sky* appeared three years later, at Said's urging Mohr was commissioned to take photographs of Palestinians and was allowed to mount the exhibit at the United Nations. He was forbidden to attach any words to the photos other than the name or place represented. While noting the politics of this act, Said nonetheless saw an ironic value in it, as well, since "the problem of writing about and representing—in all senses of the word—Palestinians in some fresh way is part of a much larger problem. For it is not as if no one speaks about or portrays the Palestinians. The difficulty is that everyone, including the Palestinians themselves, speaks a very great deal. A huge body of literature has grown up, most of it polemical, accusatory, denunciatory" (Said 1986, 4).¹

By contrast, the Berger/Mohr collaboration seems remote (literally) from the conflicts of the Middle East, and the fact that Mohr was not allowed to attach words to his United Nations exhibit may have upset Said more than it upset the photographer, if we are to judge by *Another Way of Telling*. Writes Mohr: "To make successful portraits, it probably helps to have taken some self-portraits, and also to have learnt to accept the photographs others have taken of yourself. Otherwise, how is it possible to understand the embarrassment, the worry, even the panic, which often assails people when they know that are being photographed" (Berger 1982, 38). But Said's book is a protest against being interpreted by others. The Berger/Mohr book has several essays by Berger and a short bit of writing by Mohr, but the heart of the volume consists of a series of photos in a French farming village over a year or so, presented pretty much without comment. Various photographs or sections of them are repeated, arranged non-chronologically, etc., and this suggests an implied but ambiguous commentary. The pictures and their arrangement raise questions that the author does not wish to answer. Thus, in his preface Berger protests that the book is not simply "reportage," but is a "work of imagination," shaped by a philosophy: "A photograph," he writes, "is a meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer and those who are using the photograph are often contradictory. These contradictions both hide and increase the natural ambiguity of the photographic image" (7). Berger underscores the centrality of this openness to interpretation by describing it as the other way of telling that he chooses as his book's title—a telling that is not verbal.

¹ This well described the venomous response his work has received from Ronald Radosh, Werner Cohn, and others (see "Anonymous").

Said recognizes and admires this quality in Berger, writing that “the best thing about him. . . is his relentless striving for accessible truths about the visual arts—their ambiguity, memorial enchainments, half-conscious projections, and irreducibly subjective force” (Said 1982, 149). But one senses that Said distrusts the “natural ambiguity” that Berger valorizes in photography. *After the Last Sky* is full of words, words that surround the many portraits and elicit from them the story that Said imagines (or, in some cases, knows) they tell. “[*After the Last Sky*] is not an ‘objective’ book,” Said warns his readers (1986, 6). And yet, the natural ambiguity of Mohr’s photography cannot be fully evaded. What *is* that old Palestinian man thinking as he stares back at the camera? Possibly, it is something close to the words that Said puts in his mouth; but perhaps it is something quite unexpected. Said sees what Berger is attempting, and accepts its power to draw the viewer into a newly imagined world. Thus, he writes, “The richer the photograph in quotation, the broader the scope for creative interpretation. . . . In destroying the notion of sequence, Berger allows one to see mutual ‘energies of attraction’ between photographs, so that, as he says, the ambiguity of photographs ‘at last comes true’” (1982, 151-52). Characteristically, though, Said introduces a political sense that is more explicit than Berger’s: “Photographs,” he writes, “are therefore potentially insurrectionary, so long as the language interpreting them does not, like most semiological discourse, become ‘reductive and disapproving’” (151). He is quoting from Berger and emphasizing the aesthetician’s Marxist roots, but he is using him to explain why his own book is so much clearer in its politics. He correctly senses in Berger a central dissatisfaction with unjust social structures and master narratives that impose an artificial linearity on time. “All photographs are possible contributions to history,” writes Berger, “and any photograph, under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history today has over time” (Berger 1982, 109). But even more compelling for Said is Berger’s narrowing of the struggle to something more personal and even family-based. “Revolutionary actions are rare,” writes Berger.

Feelings of opposition to history, however, are constant, even if unarticulated. They often find their expression in what is called private life. A home has become not only a physical shelter but also a teleological shelter, however frail, against the remorselessness of history; a remorselessness which should be distinguished from the brutality, injustice and misery the same history often contains. . . . And so, hundreds of millions of photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy. (105-108)

What difference do these two approaches make on the viewer (and reader)? In his short verbal section of *Another Way of Telling*, Jean Mohr conducts an interesting experiment. He shows five photographs to a market-gardener, a clergyman, a schoolgirl, a banker, an actress, a dance teacher, a psychiatrist, a hairdresser, and a factory worker, and records the story that each constructs to describe what is seen. Then Mohr explains “what was happening” in the photo. In each case, the engagement by the viewer is revelatory of his or her interests and worldview, seldom revelatory of the “real” story behind a particular photograph. For Berger, the “silence” surrounding Mohr’s photos is an important prelude to a hermeneutic moment that is as much about the art of photography as it is about the particular subject matter that Mohr captures: “Are the appearances which a camera transports a construction,” Berger asks, “a man-made cultural artifact, or are they, like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed?” For Berger, the answer is: both.

The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is this reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed. Likewise, the photographed image of the event, when shown as a photograph, is also part of a cultural construction. It belongs to a specific social situation, the life of the photographer, an argument, an experiment, a way of explaining the world, a book, a newspaper, an exhibition. Yet at the same time, the material relation between the image and what it represents (between the marks on the printing paper and the three these marks represent) is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a *trace*. The photographer chooses the tree, the view of it he wants, the kind of film, the focus, the filter, the time-exposure, the strength of the developing solution, the sort of paper to print on, the darkness or lightness of the print, the framing of the print—all this and more. But where he does not intervene—and cannot intervene without changing the fundamental character of photography—is between the light, emanating from that tree as it passes through the lens, and the imprint it makes on the film. It may clarify what we mean by a *trace* if we ask how a drawing differs from a photograph. A drawing is a translation. (Berger 1982, 92-93)

For Berger, the photograph itself is a *quotation*: “and an act of translation cannot usefully be compared to an art of quotation” (111). Further words move it in the direction of a translation. Simonides of Keos long ago suggested that “*poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*” (poetry is a speaking picture, painting is silent [mute] poetry). But even Berger considers