

SHORT STORY

Case Closed

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Not again! I am sure I left my wallet here on the bedside table. I was a bit tipsy last night. Probably, I had one peg too many. But that doesn't mean that I wasn't in my full senses to remember where I put my wallet. It was right here next to the car keys and the cigarette packet before I thumped onto the bed. I swear on my... well, I don't need to swear to myself, do I? I even remember the dream that I had last night. Usually I don't. I dreamt a huge raging bull was chasing a mouse with a cheese. I was laughing in my dream until I realized that the frightened mouse was but me. I was clinging to the piece of cheese. I must have remembered the milk-ad that says 'cows-want-them-back!' Silly ad, why would a cow want her milk back. The cow is a four-footed domestic animal, a caring bovine. It gives us milk, bones, hide... On my leather wallet! I had 545 Taka in cash. Yes, when I bought that packet of cigarette I had 600 taka in just two big notes. How could I forget? I bought that packet from the corner shop after fuelling the car with octane worth 400 taka. I took that 1000 taka from Tapu right before I left the office. I didn't spend any cash at the Club. I paid with my Visa card.

That reminds me, if my wallet is really lost then I must cancel my credit cards. And there were some business cards and important papers as well. And the email address from last night at the bar. Great, there ends a possible *You've Got Mail!* I'll have hard time in simply remembering what else was there in my wallet. Oh, where could it be? My frantic search for the wallet soon turned the room into an installation art. By God, Sheuly would not be impressed. She had gone to drop Rohan at school. She would never touch my wallet without asking me. Rohan is too young to know what money is. He asked me to buy him a real aeroplane the other day; the very day he was asked to draw a plane in the class. I have already asked Helena about the wallet. Usually, when something is lost the blame automatically goes to the fussy. I don't want to make a fuss about 545 taka. If Sheuly comes to know about it, the poor girl is likely to get a beating. We have this young girl working for us for a couple of years now. Nothing like this has happened in these two years. So I'll give her the benefit of doubt. But that doesn't help the case of my missing wallet, does it? Well, the wall ate my wallet. That's a nice rhyme. I better continue as I steer along the road....

The Wall ate the Money. That's very unpoetic. Maybe I could use a pun here. The wall ate money. The wall ate many. My pen neigh. That's better. Now the wall can stand for a wall that will play with the memory of the reader. Maybe the wall will allude to the Berlin Wall. It will make perfect sense once 'Many' and 'Money' starts corresponding with the mass and capitalism. Great, I haven't lost my touch after all. I stopped at the traffic light. I have always been troubled by the question as to why one should study literature. As a banker, whose main game is to toss-up between deciding for either debit or credit and to meet clients with a painted face, I have always felt awkward when people ask me about my major at university. English Lit! What do you actually study? It's probably not fair when you have scores of MBAs and technical hands working under you. 'No, we don't study. We learn to remain human in a mechanised world.' But that's an answer that I never give. I don't expect them to understand.



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spare myself from Sheuly's interrogation. Or maybe I didn't want to get the poor maid into trouble. I was just happy that the amount was negligible and things could go back to normal without much complicity. That was not to happen. The

next day my chapstick was gone. The Labello didn't roll under the bed nor was it left back at the office. Convinced that none of the other three souls of the house had any use of my lip-balm, I again decided not to probe into the matter. It happened again the day after. This time my handkerchief was gone. Was it in the wash? No, Helena via Sheuly assured me. Did I drop it off somewhere? Possibly. But usually when I get back home I empty my pocket on the side-table before slipping into something comfortable. It is the only time my personal belongings that bear witness to my day's deeds come out to rest with me under the bedside lamp. Something weird was going on. If somebody had broken into the house, then the other pricier objects would have been the first to disappear. My music system and the CDs should have been the prime target. Sheuly is too serious a type to play pranks with me. Rohan, even at the age of four, is as private as you can get. He has a very reserved mind of his own. I can't imagine him hiding my hanky or chapstick. Because of the air-conditioning the windows of my bedroom are hardly opened. That leaves out possibility of outside intruders. And, drunk or not, it is simply unlikely that I am simply losing my personal items outside my home and searching for them inside. I am not

Nasiruddin Hodja to search things in the bedroom, rather than outside in the dark, just because there is a lamp on my bedside table! Well, the list of missing items was getting bigger by the minute. It soon appeared that I was not the only one. Sheuly had been losing her stuff as well. She lost her phonebook, money, receipts from the laundry, newspaper bill, cable television bill, cleaners' bill in the last few days. And Rohan lost his favourite sticker album and some of his sketches. Helena had already been interrogated. Then my car key was gone. I had to hire a CNG that day and managed to go to the office without being mugged. Maksud, our apartment caretaker, came with a key-maker and made me a couple of spare keys. Every time something went missing, every nook and corner of the room was searched, and nothing was found. Rohan was convinced it was the monsters from the animation film, *Monster Inc.* Those creepy-looking monsters from the closet were taking all our things to punish me because they couldn't find any little boy to scare in this room. Poor soul. Ever since he had been shifted to his own room, he was trying to find an excuse to get his niche back between his parents. He was too scared to sleep on his own, even though he liked playing in his own room the whole day long. So all three of

us were back to the haunted room. Our effort to train Rohan as a grown-up had to be momentarily suspended. Way to go, you mystery thief! It is not only the material loss but also the psychological impact that gets onto your nerve when you are robbed. Every moment I felt that someone or something had intruded into my personal world. I was being watched. The shield of my outward self that I had so deliberately polished had been breached. Someone or something was just watching my vulnerable inner self and taking a voyeuristic pleasure. And I could do nothing about it. This continued for nearly two months. Then one day when I was shaving in the bathroom, in the mirror I noticed a brown string hanging from the wooden cabinet behind me. It was nearly four inches long and dangling as if to tease me. I tiptoed and opened one of the curtain rods and stood on my reading chair. I cautiously poked the string, and wow, a huge brown creature appeared. Believe me, it was a rat of the size of a Kitten. Before I could appreciate its size, it just ran along the wall and disappeared. I cried for reinforcements. Rohan clung close to his mother. Helena curiously watched from the main door. She had a broom in her hand. Sheuly was holding her saree high up to her knee and standing on her toes, for

reason unknown to me. "It mustn't escape," I warned them. I pulled the cabinet a bit, and then noticed a small hole on the false ceiling. I started hitting the hole gently. The brittle hardboard roof gave in. My chapstick dropped on the floor. I kept hitting the roof and the hole got bigger and bigger. Down came a heavily chewed-up wallet with traces of papers in it, my car keys, plus tons of other stuff that we didn't even know about. Soon there was a mound of all our lost memories.

A trap was set the next day with a big piece of cheese. Like a raging bull I saw to the end of our thieving guest. It was a bloody affair administered by our apartment caretaker. The case of missing items was closed. But somehow the room felt empty.

Shamsad Mortuza is on leave from English department, Jahangirnagar University for PhD studies at London University.

Letter from TORONTO

Cartoon controversy Canadian style

REBECCA SULTANA

Over twenty-five years ago my cousin's baby had a strange tic. He wouldn't let his head be touched. Now the Bengali way of showing affection to a child is to tousle his hair. But one pat on the head and the baby would jerk like someone touched by an electric rod. One can guess what the entire cousin clan, myself included, did when we visited the aforementioned baby. We all patted him on the head. Even my uncle, an army General to boot, in his usual somber and dead pan way, would step up to the baby and put his hand on his head. That itself provided us further mirth. Not the reaction of the baby but the fact that my uncle was capable of doing such a thing. The moral of my story? The more you react irrationally the more provoked you will get. Along with the rest of the Muslim world, Canadian Muslims are equally upset in the wake of the cartoon controversy. So far Muslim protests have been wide spread and peaceful. What were, however, more disturbing than Muslim anger were the deliberate acts of provocations. Anyone who felt like it, threatened to print the cartoons somewhere. The motive was simply to annoy the already frayed nerves of another faith just because the broad definition of freedom of speech allows one to say or write anything. The first instance was of a Halifax professor who declared that he would paste the cartoons on his office door. In Calgary, Muslims were incensed when they discovered copies of those cartoons posted on lamp posts in an inner city neighbourhood. Hundreds of copies of the cartoons were removed from the student newspaper office at a University in Prince Edwards Island. There was protest around McGill University as well. Trying to be innovative, the student paper of Victoria University, a part of the University of Toronto, printed a new cartoon, intending

to "provoke debate, dialogue and thought," and not to "promote violence or hate." This cartoon depicted the two revered religious figures of Jesus and our prophet (PBUH) kissing in the "Tunnel of Tolerance." Thankfully, McMaster has been immune from the controversy so far. Among all these, the pattern that emerges is neither pretty nor respectful. Seeing the volatile protests on TV and newspaper, especially in the Arab world, where people reacted violently with tragic loss of life, the cartoons have become a tinderbox with some people in the West behaving like children with a matchbox while gleefully anticipating how loud a bang they can create. This is pure sensationalizing. Sadly, what is fueling this flame of anger could have been controlled by the Muslims themselves. From the earliest stories that we were made to read in school primers, we got to know how throughout the period of his mission, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) experienced all manners of hardships. His own people insulted him horribly, even calling him a magician or a madman. Others wanted to kill him and even schemed to do so. Despite all that, the Prophet (PBUH) tried to teach people of all backgrounds and cultures about the Quran, and therefore about proper morality and good behavior. This is what is sorely lacking in today's world. Instead of violence we need to deal with dialogue that is articulate and timely. Much of the perception of Islam that the rest of the World has is based on ignorance. And left on its own the ignorance will grow and fester. The results? Insulting cartoons and bigoted documentaries like the one produced in the same Denmark. Ever since Edward Said passed away we have lost the most coherent and strident voice in support of Islam. And he was not even a Muslim. Surely we

have Islamic scholars teaching in the higher seats of knowledge in the U.S. and in Europe? Leila Ahmed, for example, a Harvard religious study professor, is highly respected for her explications of women's place in Islam. There are others in the Sciences and Liberal Arts, who profess the Islamic faith. Yet on this particular issue there is a conspicuous silence from that corner. One of my favorite writers, Kamila Shamsie, wrote a piece in the *New York Times* on irresponsible journalism and senseless provocateurs. We need more of such writing. So far I have seen very few. There is more than enough of the other variety, however. In the February 13 issue of *Time*, Andrew Sullivan wrote a very angry diatribe against Muslim violence and the West's value of free speech. Another reader of the *Toronto Star* called for a boycott of the Muslim world. Boycott the Muslim world? With all their oil? I would, certainly, like to see that happen. With all this furor, the reaction from south of the border has been remarkably quiet. This has been taken as a sign of tolerance. Apparently not so. A former professor of mine, again a non-Muslim, found himself in hot waters recently. A former journalist from Hyderabad, Anantha Babbili is now the Dean of one of the largest faculties of journalism and mass communication in the U.S South. An avowed Democrat, he is also a regular figure in the pre-election Democratic Conventions. Once a teacher and a mentor, over the years, he has now become more of a friend. As a follow up to some unfinished work, I have been futilely trying to talk to him for the last few days. My e-mails to him were left unanswered. I would call his office several times a day only to get the answering machine. I left messages. Finally, exasperated, I called up his secretary who herself didn't know what time he would be in. The next day,

calling at eight in the morning, I finally get him on the phone. Apologetic at first, he told me the reason for his elusiveness. He had written a piece for Nashville's leading newspaper *The Tennessean* about the cartoons, highlighting the thin line between good journalism and hatred. He was little prepared for the repercussions. Not only did he get hate letters through e-mail, people actually left hand written hate notes drawn with Nazi Swastikas and the Star of David in his home mail box. The University was besieged with protest calls. In all this chaos, the University administration was not too pleased about the negative publicity their institute was receiving and in a series of meetings about possible damage control; Dr. Babbili decided to lay low. "This is not the America I had envisioned," he told me sadly. Where was his freedom of speech? Dr. Babbili also forwarded me a message sent to him by the Vice President of the Islamic Center of Nashville and a teacher in Vanderbilt University. Among all the Universities within the Nashville region, excepting Vanderbilt, none chose to deal with the issue through inter faith communication or dialogue. But silence allows suspicion to breed and the results are apparent. Only last year Dr. Babbili had invited me to Nashville to speak as a panel member on the media representation of Muslim women in the West. As I finished my talk and mingled among the crowd, people came up to me and said how much they have learned. I had spoken on the iconic representation within Western discourse of the Hijab as a tool of oppression when on the other hand; the Hijab is becoming a mode of protest against authority and an assertion of identity among young Muslim women from across the West. It was all well and good. But the irony remains and raises the question: who was I enlightening? It was a University conference, attended

by the University crowd, journalists and activists who are already aware of these uneven power dynamics. And these people are the minorities. They can fume and fret about all the unfairness and withhold their votes as protest. As a result they are the least able to amend anything. The rest of the eighty percent don't know who Edward Said is, neither who Leila Ahmed is or what they had written about. And they are the voters and the voices that get heard. This leads to the inevitable question of what the role of the intellectuals should be. They may attend conferences every year, publish in Harvard Journals, bring out books from respected university presses but the fact remains that they are largely unheard outside the lofty gates of the Academia. What a tremendous loss. What the eighty percent do get to see is the burning and the plunder, which Sullivan describes as an iconic image the figure of a Hamas member raising a flag atop the deserted European Union office. News channels, their ratings soaring, will hook audiences to their channels as they watch these scenes with disgust, all-knowingly shaking their heads. While the journalists go through the "I told you so" routine the victims in this repetitious macabre drama are the Muslims themselves as they open the flood-gates to further provocations.

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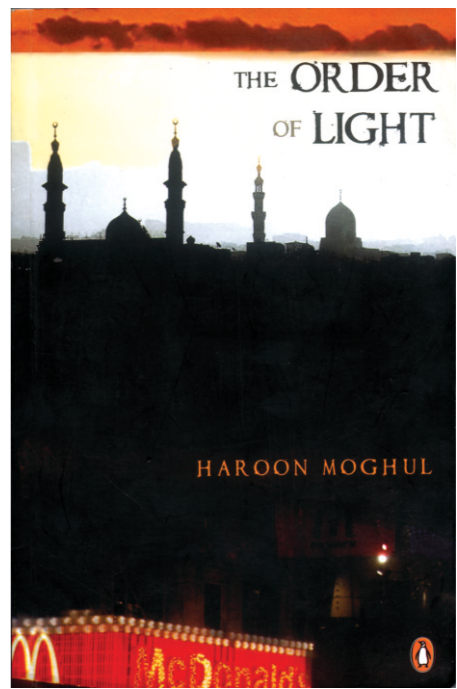
Book Review

Islam and the West: Civilizations in Conflict?

ZAHID AKTER

The Order of Light by Haroon Moghul; New Delhi; Penguin Books India; 2005; Rs. 250; pp.274

Though 9/11 sparked a wave of polemical discourse on Islamic and Western views of civilization, the discursive journey juxtaposing these two elements is not new. First initiated by purely religious antagonism (the Crusades, for example), it was followed by the discourse of colonialism in which the West aimed to subjugate other nations. The Islamic East was a significant part of these nations. The current Western will to dominate other races (Islam being a major target) culturally, economically and politically has reactivated the discourse, which till now was mostly restricted to the essay form. Haroon Moghul seems to have broken away from this tradition by taking the less traveled road of fiction to treat this theme through his recently published *The Order of Light*. The reader may wonder (as I did) how a writer can handle an issue in fiction: How can one create characters out of flesh and blood, make them swirl in the intricacies of life and still advance one's agenda? Such concerns made me skeptical about the book but they also incited me to read it.



The story of *The Order of Light* revolves around a young Pakistani-American who along with his Indian roommate enrolls in a language institute in Cairo to study Arabic. As they start their course, the Western-educated Pakistani-American frequently finds himself torn between the faith he was born into and the culture he was brought up in. At home he is reminded of prayer time though he often skips it. On the street, he encounters beautiful Egyptian girls whom he chases. The setting of Cairo evokes the glorious history of Salah al-Din and Egypt's present abasement at the hands of the West. He asks numerous questions to himself and others

and in confusion aimlessly frequents Cairo streets. The story takes a turn when one such episode brings him to a dilapidated mosque where he chances upon something quite unexpected—a gathering of five men who declare themselves to be members of 'The Order of Light.' They claim to come from the future, saying they are the descendants of Salah al-Din's twelfth-century Kurdish retinue. Egypt, they say, is not the city it should have been and Cairenes are possessed by Others. To redeem the glory, the only way would be to commit suicide. The young

every corner of the globe. An embittered character observes, "First they separated God from the political sphere, calling this political secularism. Then they separated God from the economic sphere, calling this economic secularism. They did this, bit by bit, till we became entirely deconstructed, told [us] that we could still cherish our belief in God, though without any way of realizing it." Don't think, however, that the book is full of such down-to-earth stuff. The writer is also fond of wit, quips and repartees. Here is one on America, for instance, "One day they'll be sitting in a café with so much coffee but no friends." A novel that deals with an issue as complex as Islam and modernity will not rely on strength of plot design and characterization alone. So the reader should not expect to read a thrilling story with characters that makes one ruminate over them. Here the story is told from largely one man's perspective, and he happens to be both the narrator and protagonist. He takes part in events throughout and reflects on them all along, leaving little space for the reader to interpret for oneself. The only stylistic novelty of the narrative is that the story is also told by the protagonist's friend, Harris. This gives a good idea about how the same incident looks to different persons. However, in dealing with the issue the writer seems to prefer clashes within an individual rather than among many people. He does this by creating a character that represents opposing values of life. The setting of Cairo also enables him to reflect the conflict between the past glory of Islam and its present metamorphosis into a city that looks vaguely Western. One caveat if you choose to read the book is it presupposes quite a bit of historical knowledge on the part of the reader. Only then can one empathize with the characters. Perhaps it's because of such empathy that Haroon Moghul can justify undertaking such a project.

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More Comments from Bangladeshi authors/academics



It is probably easy to shrug off Bangladeshi writing just because it's in English. In the last 15 years this newspaper has proved it otherwise. Kudos to *The Daily Star* for tapping into the minefield of creative energy, for believing in new talents and new voices, and for showing creativity chooses its own language; not the other way round. --Shamsad Mortuza English Department, Jahangirnagar University

Going through *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing*, I was really happy to see a whole lot of new writers, especially of short fiction. That not a few of them were from outside the country is also an encouraging sign. It is good that the editor managed to cast a wide net in trying to draw in new contributors--the results augur well for Bangladesh writing in English. Keep it up, *Daily Star!* --Fakrul Alam, Professor, English Department, Dhaka University

I think it's amazing that a major newspaper like *The Daily Star* enthusiastically published unknown writers in its anthology.

--Abeer Hoque Winner, Tanenbaum Award (San Francisco) for non-fiction

Buy the book! Help *The Daily Star* in its efforts to encourage creative writing in English by Bangladeshis. Available in city bookstores.