

BOOK REVIEW

Re-reading history

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

"The Clash of Civilizations? Asian responses.
Edited by Salim Rashid
University Press Limited.
ISBN 98405 1390 7

THIS book is probably the most important and interesting one to read as the world grapples with what looks like a prophecy being proven right. Samuel P. Huntington shook the global intellectual world by saying that future history would be a clash between civilizations and of course we hear everyday now about the conflict between the West and Islam. Given the present global scene, one feels that Huntington may almost have scripted it himself but what did he actually say? There are surprisingly few people who have actually read the book. Most have heard about it via the ever sensational creating by media. But this book reviewed is a collection of a calm approach to the thesis which is basically about America's search for the anti-thesis some say anti-Christ in the post cold war confusion haunting global politics.

The historian who came in from the Cold. A cold grip. It all began with the USA's successful demolition of the Soviet regime, which left them without a proper and credible enemy. Western read American intellectuals were left to understand and analyze a situation not explained in previous cold war simplicities. Francis Fukuyama was the first to have a whack at reading a new future in his monumental and now surprisingly dated thesis "End of History"? He argued there that with the fall of the Soviet regime, conventional history as understood in Hegelian terms had come to an end and that it heralded the triumph of the Western capitalist-democratic model. Hence, history making a la conflicts had come to an end. The next phase would be an enlargement of this western model as societies chose to follow what had been proven as the best historical process and its conclusive product after a period of manifold conflicts.

Huntington takes up the cudgel from here. "...they all miss a crucial, indeed central aspect of what global politics is likely to be in the coming years... the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating sources of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in the world affairs but the

principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilization. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." It was this going to be an era of new conflicts.

Huntington pushes his theory to say that differences among civilizations are not only real but also basic. "Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and most important, religion." He splits out a series of reasons, which he thinks are responsible for this to happen seeing it as an inevitable process and argues that the differences and clashes have always been on. Interestingly, he mentions the Arab world's conflict with the Blacks as the intra-civilizational clash manifested through the slave trade.

Death and identification of civilizations. "Prof. Arnold Toynbee had identified had identified 21 major civilizations but only six of them exist in the contemporary world." Huntington himself has identified seven or eight as he says. They are, Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African. "So, arbitrary as these divisions may be, his clash is not just between Islam and the West but these many cultures as well and also between them. He however thinks that the dominant conflict will be between the West and Confucian and Islamic ones. One supposes that means Washington versus Islam and China at least.

Huntington also mentions clashes elsewhere, one being between Islamic and Hindu civilizations in India. The demolition of Ayodha is mentioned and due explanations given. In fact, he even goes into the issue of civil wars stating that the cold war was actually a "Western civil wars".

"With the end of the cold war, international politics moves out of its western phase and its center piece becomes the inter-action between the West and non-western civilizations. In the politics of civilizations, then peoples and governments of non-western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history". History is therefore primarily understood as an inter-action between the "West and the Rest".

But is Huntington blind to the ways of the West? Listen to him on this. "The West in Effect is using international institutions, military power and economic resources to run the world in ways that will maintain Western predominance, protect

Western interests and promote Western political and economic values."

"That at least is the way in which non-westerners see the new world and there is a significant element of truth in their view."

Huntington argues that no universal culture exists and this worldview of one culture a western idea according to him isn't possible and these and other differences have supported the clash between civilizations.

The Asian response. But numerous Asian scholars including those who fault him for imputing labels where none exist have also challenged such a view. Prof. Chaibong Hahn of Sonsei University, Seoul takes it to a new level of reasoning, arguing that the roots of Huntington's belief is rooted in race which is just a step back from notions of "civilization". Quoting extensively from European documents and the US, he traces the progression of the idea from segregationist and supremacist ideas to the present idea of identity with cultures. He also looks at the contemporary ideas of culture and race that is sweeping across the West.

"When we make claims on behalf of "cultural identity", we are secure in the thought that we are not advocating racism, but simply, "cultural pluralism". Culture is thought to be more porous, flexible and less racist a term than race. However, its logic is itself "always already" tainted with the idea of race. As "culture as we employ the term nowadays, is simultaneously racist and compatible with a certain critique of racism."

Prof. Hahn also says that Confucianism as understood by Huntington is inadequate and incomplete. Hahn doesn't see it as religion at all and he says nor does most SE Asians. To him, it's a collection of manners, etiquette's and manners etc. But what he thinks makes Confucianism different from other "cultures" is that it's based on what people do rather than they're cultural identity. "Confucianism, which distinguishes human beings only in terms of their actual practices, morally as manifested through concrete forms of behavior or "propriety" is one way in which one can avoid the pitfalls of identity politics and avert the "clash of civilizations".

Though understandably radical and brilliant as well, many have questioned it on numerous grounds including the empirical basis of such arguments. The most eloquent attack has come from the SouthEast Asians or the Confucians, as Huntington understands it rather than Islamic scholars as Huntington understands it. Prof. Paul H. Hammond of Pittsburgh University, a major

scholar on Islamic civilizations has argued both on the evidence and its analysis on way to the theory building. He concludes by saying the following, "This is an audacious theory. A more prudent one will direct our inquiries not at civilizations but at cultures, a concept that is less abstract and more subject to empirical verification, one that enables us to employ the techniques of social, economic and political pluralism to cope with conflict and promote cooperation. It will also focus on their difficult relationship, invariably in tension, between governments, which is largely a secular institution, and the values that most humankind derive in some degree from non-sectarian sources."

These words fairly sum up the responses of the Asian scholars. But in all fairness to Huntington, he is no warmonger. In some ways, his theory and perhaps its limited ways of analysis, leads to his own inescapable conclusions. He becomes, without choosing to be a proponent of clashes to many. Yet his own conclusion about the tasks of nations should also be taken into account.

"For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to co-exist with the others."

It's a statement, which doesn't find enough echoes in his own body of work, which is primarily pessimistic. But what Huntington is arguing primarily against is the notion of a universal culture and the end of conflict, which can explain the endless violence stalking the Soviet Union free world. Universality, he thinks is a western notion and applying this isn't possible because non-westerns especially Asian civilizations are imbedded in their particularities. In way, it's actually about the concern of "history" coming to an end and "history" continuing.

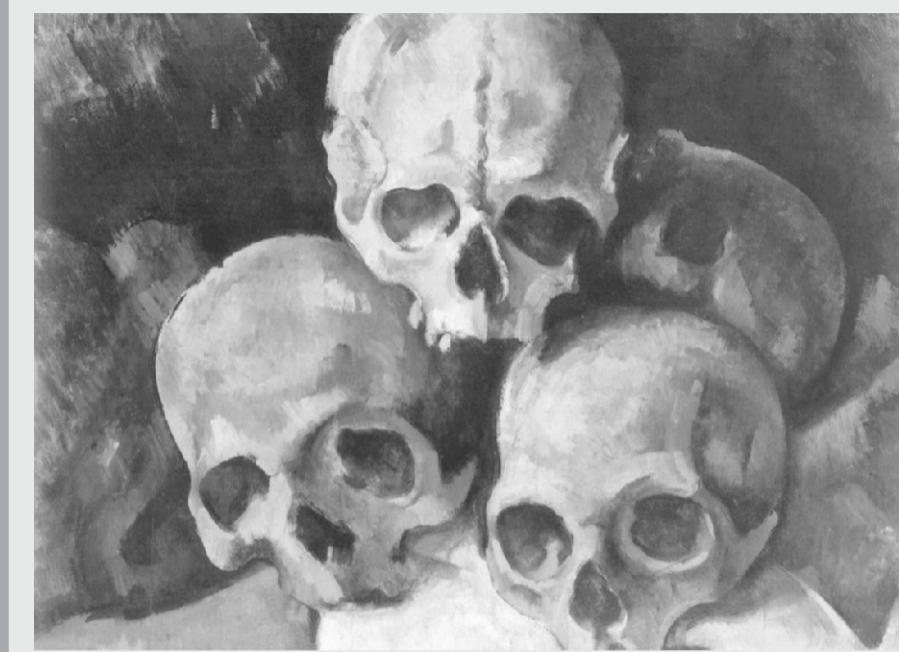
Obviously, the West wasn't intellectually prepared for the cold war's end. The post-cold war theorists are in a way still trying to define themselves. And the clash is certainly part of that logic stream. This book has to be read if only because they provide a window to the tumultuousness, confusion and worldview of the West. The West is a culture, civilization, group, economic power, political construct etc striving to redesign its understanding of history, as history itself becomes more unpredictable. This is a must read for all open minds.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Daily Star staffer.

POEMS

Dreaming of Cézanne: A Triptych

SUDEEP SEN



The Skulls: Paul Cézanne

1. The Skulls*

restoring memory
music, genealogy --
secrets
only fossils
can keep alive.
Skulls on wood,
on carpet,
on drapery --
studies encrypted
like
an unwrapped
pyramid of bones,
mummies waiting
to be embalmed
in oil and graphite --
as I sprinkle
water and colour
on the shrine
of my night gods.

(*based on Paul Cézanne's series
The Skulls,
oil on canvas / graphite and water-colour on paper, 1890-1906)

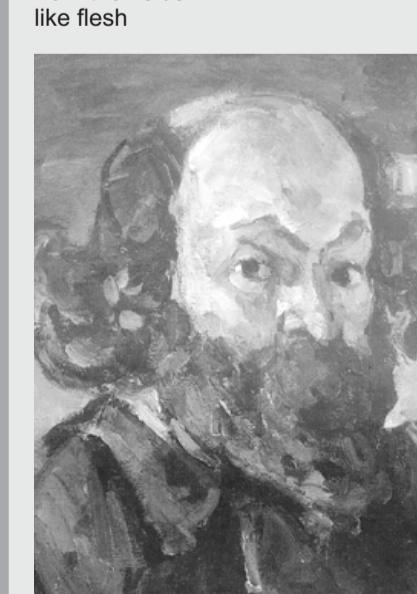
2. The Cardplayers*

The deal was done and stamped
on the brown rough leather
of the parchment. The wooden
table's crooked legs hardly held
its own weight,
let alone the gravity of
smoke, spirit and connivance.
We held our fists close
to each other as if in mistrust --
stiff cards in hand
like little rectangular blades
to cut and bleed our lives away
The future like the present
was dark and unlit, swirling
unsteadily in tobacco stench
permanently embedded
in the wood of the walls,
without a spine.

(*based on Paul Cézanne's
Cardplayers,
oil on canvas, 47.5 X 57 cm, 1893-96)

3. Jacket on a Chair*

You carelessly tossed
the jacket on a chair.
The assembly of cloth
collapsed in slow motion
into a heap of cotton --
cotton freshly picked
from the fields --
like flesh



Paul Cézanne: Self portrait

Sudeep Sen's *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins) was awarded the Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and nominated for a Pushcart Prize (USA). His writings have appeared in Times Literary Supplement, Guardian, Independent, Financial Times, Evening Standard, Harvard Review, Times of India, among many others. He is the international editor of Six Seasons Review (Dhaka: UPL).

If your memories serve you well...

HERMIONE LEE

Atonement
Ian McEwan
Cape £16.99, pp372

THE first time we hear the hero speak, in this impressive, engrossing, deep and surprising novel, he says: "I was away in my thoughts." The curious phrase is echoed later by the mother of the novel's other main character, a 13-year-old girl: "Her daughter was always off and away in her mind." What it means to be 'away in your mind' is one of the key subjects here. Fantasy, day-dream, evasions, self-dramatisation, all the powerful and dangerous work of the imagination, do battle with the facts, things as they are. Can the imagined and the real ever be 'at one'?

The two main characters, Robbie Turner and Tallis, are placed, in the first part of the novel, in an English setting of deceptive plausibility. It is 1935, the summer of an intense heatwave and rumours of war. The Tallis family, inheritors of a 'baronial-Gothic' late-nineteenth-century mansion in Surrey with vestiges of a more elegant Adam-style house (a fountain, a temple) in the extensive grounds, aren't quite as solid as their house makes them look.

The father is away in London, involved in mysterious defence plans at the Ministry and a long-standing affair. The mother, Emily, is withdrawn into illness, and dogged by a life-long resentment of her self-pleasing sister, a promisingly reckless off-stage character called Hermione. The son is an affable joker; the older daughter, Cecilia, has been to Cambridge but is now at a loss; and her sister, Briony, is a ferociously orderly child 'possessed' by a desire to have the world just so - a desire that takes the form of writing. Handsome Robbie Turner is the family protégé: his mother is the charlady, and the Tallises have helped him get to Cambridge; he wants to be a doctor.

Into this household, one fatal day (as Briony might put it) come Hermione's neglected children: sexy, manipulative teenage Lola, and two

pathetic twin brothers, whom Briony immediately ropes in to be in her play, a wonderful and absurd farce called *The Trials of Arabella*. The play is meant to welcome home her brother, who arrives with a rich, stupid young businessman. By the end of the day, Robbie and Cecilia have discovered they are passionately in love, the twins have run away, Lola has been raped, Briony has accused Robbie of the assault and he has been arrested, and *The Trials of Arabella* has never been produced.

Part Two cuts to May 1940. Robbie has been let out of prison to join the infantry, and Cecilia is waiting for him to 'come back'. Both she and Briony (who are estranged) have gone into nursing. Two long sections describe, with unsparing, closely researched, gripping relentlessness, the retreat to Dunkirk, as experienced by Robbie and his two (splendidly done) comrades-at-arms and by Nurse Briony Tallis in St Thomas's Hospital. The bloody, chaotic shambles of the retreat sabotages one common national fantasy, of Dunkirk as a heroic rescue - a view of history consistent with all McEwan's previous work. Briony, matured by her hospital experience, goes to ask forgiveness of her sister.

In the last part of the novel, it's nearly 50 years on. Briony is a famous novelist in her seventies. She is suffering from the onset of dementia, which will produce complete memory loss (a terrible infliction, especially in a novel so much concerned with the power of memory). In a dazzlingly dexterous coda, she goes back to the family home, now a grand country-house hotel, for a reunion, where one last surprise awaits her - and us.

As in all McEwan's midlife work, a private drama of loss of innocence or betrayal is played out against a larger history of bad faith. Here, the

personal story - especially Briony's childhood failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you', and her later struggle with remorse - is painfully strong. And there are all kinds of tender and exact human details: the lovers' determination to survive, the working-class mother's faith in her son, the confused hopelessness of the little boys, Emily's dedication to her migraines. But there is more going on here than a personal story.

Atonement, we at last discover, is the novel Briony Tallis has been writing between 1940 and 1999. This quite familiar fictional trick allows McEwan to ask some interesting questions about writing, in what is a highly literary book. The epigraph is a quotation from *Northanger Abbey*, where Catherine Morland is reproached by Henry Tilney for imagining Gothic horrors in a well-protected English setting. (In a nice echo, the Tallis-home-turned-hotel is called 'Tilney's.') All through, historical layers of English fiction are invoked - and rewritten. Jane Austen's decums to black farce. Forster's novels of social misunderstanding - the attack on poor Leonard Bast, Adela Quested's false charge of rape - are ironically echoed.

When Briony starts writing *Atonement* as a novella, in 1940, she thinks it should be modern and impressionistic, like Virginia Woolf. But she gets a rejection letter from Cyril Connolly at *Horizon* telling her that fiction should have more plot. The advice comes from a friend of Connolly's, one Elizabeth Bowen. So her rewritten novella - the Part One of *Atonement* - recalls *The Last September*, with its restive teenage girl in the big house. Then Briony writes the war, and all the slow, deliberate literariness of Part One falls away.

Atonement asks what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now. One of the things it can do, very subtly in McEwan's case, is to be androgynous. This is a novel written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a 'male' subject, and there's nothing to distinguish between them.

If fiction is a controlling play, a way of ordering the universes in which the writer is away in her - or his - thoughts, then is it a form of escapism, lacking all moral force? Is it just another form of false witness, and so always 'unforgivable'? And are some forms of fiction - modernist, middle-class, limited to personal relations - more unforgivable than others? A political critique edges in.

But I wasn't sure how much the life of establishment England (with its diplomats planning mass bombings, its rapacious businessmen, its repression of women, its maintaining of feudal class systems) was being held responsible for the carnage visited on the poor bloody infantry at Dunkirk. Robbie suggests it: 'A dead civilisation. First his own life ruined, then everybody else's.'

In Part One, there is a significant tussle between Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain, for a precious Meissen vase, given to an uncle in the First World War by the French villagers whom he had saved. The vase is broken, but mended so that the cracks hardly show (another literary bow, this time to *The Golden Bowl*). Just so, in Briony's accusation, 'the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks'.

In war-time, one of the servants breaks it irrecoverably. The 'making one' of the vase was a fix, and couldn't hold. Yet a great deal does survive at the end of the novel: family, children, memory, writing, perhaps even love and forgiveness. Or perhaps not; it depends which of the controlling novelist's endings we decide to believe in, as we hold this fragile shape of the unified fictional work in our mind's eye, and are made aware how easily it can all fall apart.

-The Observer

BOOKER

Booker bridesmaid Bainbridge left out again

FIACHRA GIBBONS

BERYL Bainbridge, the eternal Booker prize bridesmaid, was last night snubbed for a sixth time when her novel failed at the penultimate hurdle for Britain's greatest literary prize.

According to *Queeney*, a small but beautifully account of the last days of Samuel Johnson, had been the clear and popular favourite for the £21,000 prize. However, none of the judges, the Guardian has learned, argued strongly for her work to be among the six in the final reckoning. Instead two former Booker winners, the Australian Peter Carey, with *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and Ian McEwan, with *An Atonement*, emerged as the most fancied to pick up the prize on October 17.

Other shocks were that Melvyn Bragg's acclaimed *A Son of War* and Nick Hornby's even more admired *How To Be Good* failed to make the final six. Andrew Miller's *Oxygen* was among the six. Though warmly received by critics, it had not been thought the novel would be selected by a Booker jury that had gone out of its way to suggest it wanted an accessible winner.

Miller, who won the Impac award, richest in the world, for *Ingenious Pain*, was one of three less obvious choices, showing this jury is no respecter of reputations, nor to be cowed by public sentiment. But it was the exclusion of Bainbridge, described by the late Auberon Waugh as the "greatest writer never to win the Booker", that

caused most protest when the six were announced amid the gilt and stucco of the patriotic Savile Club in London's West End.

Asked how the five judges could be so heartless as to drop Bainbridge "when the public clearly wanted her", one of their number, writer and critic Philip Hensher, retorted: "So we are to let the prize be decided by public sentiment then? I thought it was a literary prize." Last night there was no reply from Bainbridge's London home.

The jury chairman, Kenneth Baker, former Tory minister and part-time poet, was equally bullish, bawling away the "Beryl Question", with a flowery flourish to the effect that "this Booker list has reconnected with the reading public... This is a very rich year indeed. Everyone has their own views, of course, because this has been a truly splendid year for fiction."

Baker asserted that the final six had been arrived at unanimously. One or two of his colleagues privately begged to differ, but there appeared to have been no tantrums, fist fights, or raised voices among the jury of grandees that the longlist of 24 was whittled down - although the final reckoning is yet to come. This was the first year in which the judges revealed their longlist, selected from 119 novels nominated by publishers or judges.

Oxygen by Andrew Miller The most self-consciously literary book on the list, it has been praised for its fine writing and characterisation, though it is unlikely to go down as well as his *Ingenious Pain*, which won the Impac prize. His two protagonists, Alice Valentine, a retired schoolmistress dying of cancer in the west country and a gay Hungarian writer living in Paris are barely linked at all. *Odds 9/2*

The Dark Room by Rachel Seiffert A great first novel from an Oxford-born writer who now lives in Berlin, dealing with German war guilt.

She tells the story of three people from Helmut, in the 1930s, who secretly photographs the deportation of the Gypsies to Micha, almost in the present, who tries to reconcile warm memories of his grandfather with his membership of the SS. *Odds 5/1*