

Into the heart of a great silence

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque journeys across a landscape of belief and imagination

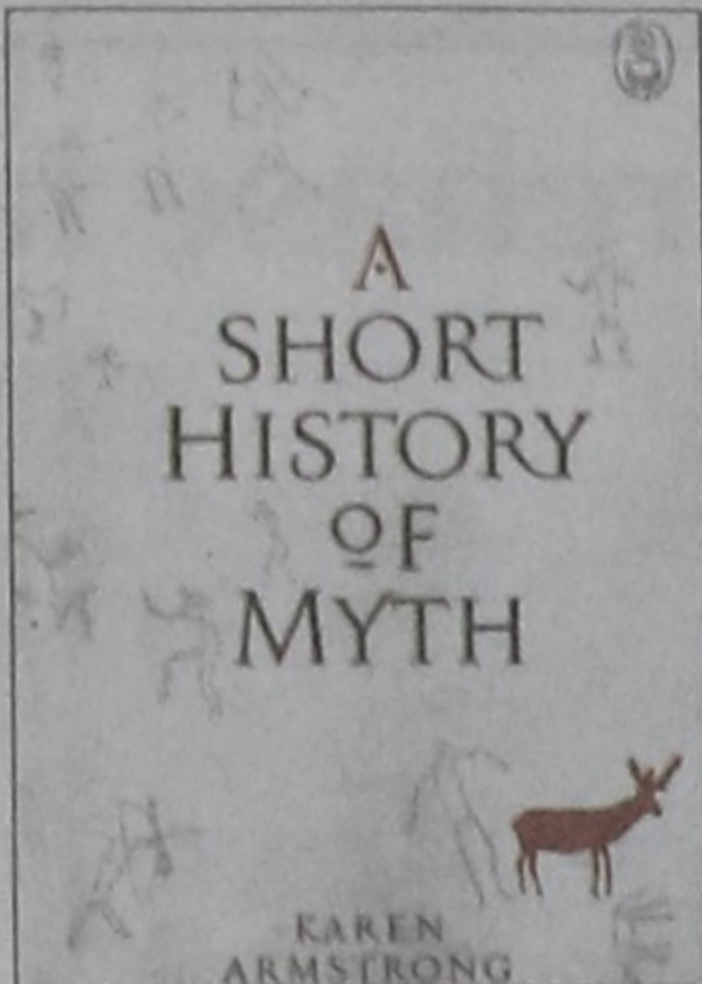
MYTH! In this age of information explosion that may not always be an index for acquiring more and more knowledge vis-à-vis an erratic pace of technological advancement. Who would possibly believe in the slightest that a myth has a role to play in human life? At first it is likely to sound anachronistic in terms of its being a story trying to explain an event, an occurrence involving some imaginary characters that is seemingly incomprehensible to the human mind. But there is so much more in a myth than meets the eye as Karen Armstrong takes us deep into the meaning, import, workability, congeniality and most of all into the humane qualities of it. She shows that a myth always existed in human life and, therefore, in a society, whatever kind that may be. Her utterances about a myth are intertwined with the mental state that one comes across in a heightened form of religious experiences that once were only liturgical in essence. A human life since that Paleolithic age down to our immediate environs is fraught with struggles, causing despair, distress, threats, challenges of various hues and magnitudes and eventually an end of this life culminating in death.

She has begun her discourse with the life and living patterns of a Neanderthal man and makes a most profound observation, among a few others, relating to their graves. She says, "There are moments when we all, in one way or another, have to go to a place that we have never seen, and do what we have not done before. Myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words. Myth therefore looks into the heart of a great silence." A myth as she elaborates through

examples of some human behavioural patterns that are products of human imagination and thought processes is extended even to a life beyond the present one.

Karen Armstrong in her extraordinarily brilliant treatise has brought 'myth' out of its obscurity and placed it in a most down to earth shape in order to reach the human mind in a simple and appealing way. With her, we readers take a fascinating tour of the Paleolithic age when hunting was the main occupation, the Neolithic age when farming by and large replaced hunting, followed by the period of early civilizations that worked as a turning point in human civilization when people started building cities in Mesopotamia and Egypt in about 4000 BCE and later on in China, India and Crete. This period somewhat marked a beginning of conflicts on the one hand between growth and development in the physical sense of the term and, on the other, its associated fear of losing contact with the old world order wherein most people felt much closer to what was divine. As life for these people approached urbanization, a 'spiritual vacuum' arose among them of which they themselves were not conscious.

As a natural consequence and to combat this malaise, the eighth century BCE witnessed a booming of religious precepts and thoughts like Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in India, monotheism in the Middle East and Greek rationalism in Europe. Prophets, saints and sages embarked on teaching humans how life should be lived for emphasizing a spiritual development of humanity where there ought to be a mythical underpinning that comes along with mysticism. The author has made it very explicit that words like



A Short History of Myth
Karen Armstrong
Canongate

myth, mystery and mysticism are akin to one another, that they "relate to the inner rather than the external world." This particular period was called the Axial age by the German Philosopher Karl Jaspers 'because it proved to be pivotal in the spiritual development of humanity; the insights gained during this time continued to nourish men and women to the present day' that spanned a period from the eighth century to 200 BCE. Oftentimes a myth fell into a contradiction with the Greek rationalism of the philosophers but then again the core value of a myth was recognized by great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

The post-axial period extending to 1500 CE until the advent of the great Western transformation witnessed the three monotheistic religions, that is, Judaism,

Christianity and Islam which, although claiming to be based historically, yet found the mythological dimension very much palpable in them. The work of the mystics bears ample evidence of this phenomenon of taking recourse to myth as they went into and described their experiences of attaining ecstasy while functioning in their inner world. The writer has given examples of a mystic's experiences while making "a journey into the depths of the psyche" through concentration that is common among all religions and describing them in myth, showing how certain mystical events have become wedded to the ideal of spirituality of people belonging to that particular religion.

The last chapter of the book deals with the concept of civilization as conceived by the Western world that witnessed "the seemingly inexorable march of new technology" which came to the aid and uplift of humanity no doubt; but an overwhelming faith in materialism fell in a negative correlation with the nourishment and growth of an inner sense of spirituality that ought to be universal and true to human sensibilities. Compassion, fellow-feeling, empathy, extending a hand to people in trouble as a good Samaritan, rising above compartmentalizing the family of human bond in terms of religion, ethnicity, complexion, linguistics and many others are great divides among humanity. Such crises in human life and their consequences are depicted through the great writers' creation of novels, eminent poets' writings of fabulous poems and illustrious artists' drawings and paintings that the author draws confidently upon them for her observations to be corroborated. Attachment to divinity is lost while

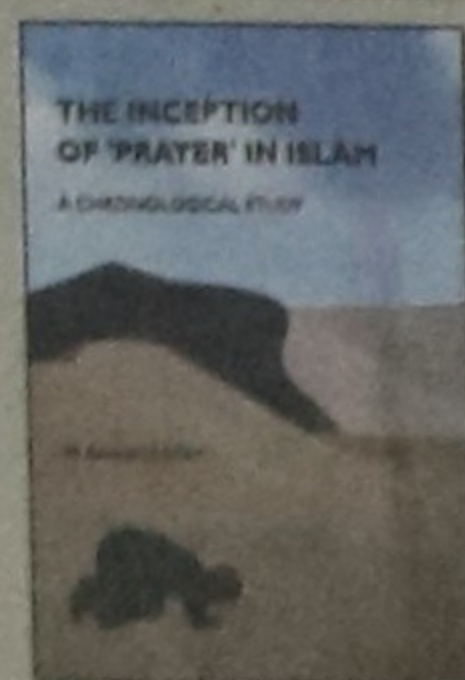
humans are basically spiritual beings. All such great visionaries have been prophetic in their message towards mankind.

How to re-create ourselves as rational yet spiritual beings yearning for a higher goal of life to be realized? Karen Armstrong has the answer to this puzzling side of the question in her most amazing deliberations on the subject of myth in a very simple way --- spelling out what it is, how and why we need it. Myth, like science, is a product of human imagination that works in a hypothetical domain of 'what if'?

Such a world of imagination accompanied by rituals guides a person into getting new insight about dealing with the problems of life as a myth is not a passive contemplation of things or events. One has rather to act upon them. One of the most important elements of a myth is enabling a person to view things in their transcendental values, thereby not losing sight of sacredness in any endeavour. Since we are the makers of myth, we should search for meaning in it to be applied as and when a situation calls for. The therapeutic value that lies deep in a myth has to be brought to the surface to transform it into an act that is palpable. The author believes it very strongly and so do we that thus this hostile, fragmented and damaged world will be re-created. The meaning of myth acquires hitherto unknown significance in this short but mighty book on wisdom. Karen Armstrong, a painstakingly serious writer, is most vocal and practical as a catalyst in this book.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is a critic, music enthusiast and Principal, Radiant International School.

AT A GLANCE

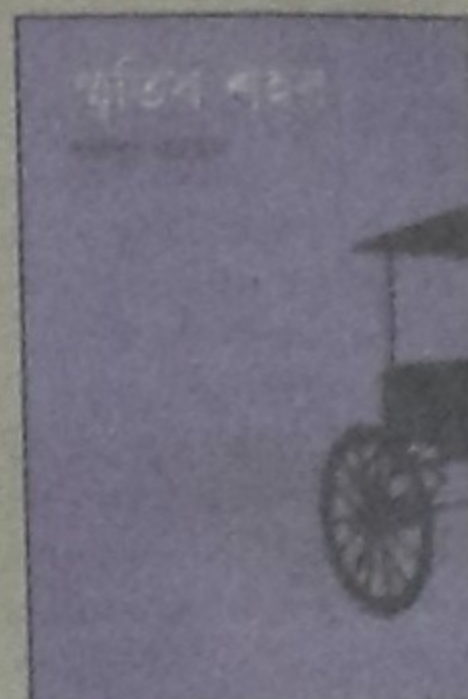


The Inception of Prayer in Islam
A Chronological Study
M. Anwarul Islam
The University Press Limited

Why are prayers necessary? And how did the concept of prayer first come into Islam? In this work, which is a satisfying intellectual analysis of the subject, you will find the answer. For a Muslim, faith is an all-important aspect of life and within that ambience comes the question of prayer. An enlightening book.

Smriti Shohor
Shamsur Rahman
Jatiya Grantha Prokashon

The poet is no more with us, but some years before he died he did a most marvellous thing of coming forth with his reflections on Dhaka. That was quite natural, seeing that the city had always been part of his growth and increasing awareness of social surroundings. Part memoir, part history, the work makes gripping reading.



Rupoboti Ebon Ruphinader Golpo
Shahida Hossain Rina
Rhythm Prokashona Sangstha

A most delectable collection of articles and stories from Rina, the work is at once a study of well-known individuals in history as also a presentation of thoughts on life and its diversity. The writer's use of language is admirable, to a point where it keeps the reader glued to the book. An enjoyable weekend plan, this.

Between 2 Spaces
Reflections on the
Spiritual in Art
Halide Islam
Pocahontas Press, Virginia

Art and philosophy have always gone hand in hand. That thought is given fresh new meaning here in this work. Halide Islam lives in the West, but it is clear that the spirituality of the East is yet a powerful underpinning in her thoughts. Study the art and then juxtapose that with her meditative analysis. You are left thinking deeply.



Posthumous examination of a political party

Shahid Alam ploughs through a remarkable scholarly analysis

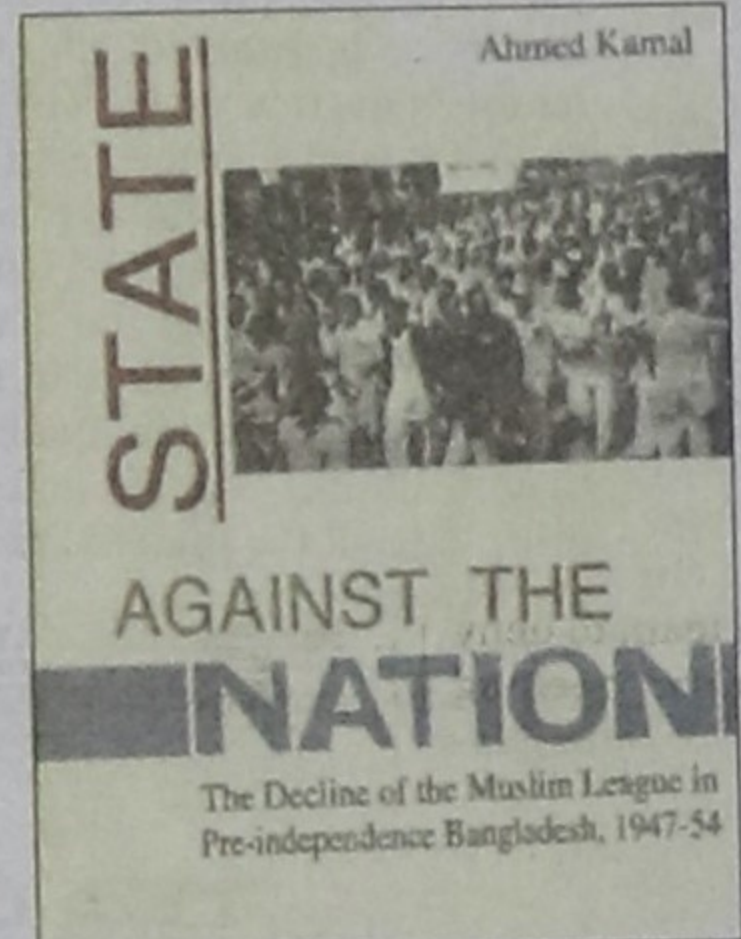
FLIPPING a dead horse might appear a pointless, not to say bizarre, exercise to many, unless that effort is expended towards explaining a momentous event in history. The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation-state is indubitably one such occurrence. The Muslim League (ML) is very much alive and kicking in its various factions in Pakistan, but it is, to all intents and purposes, at death's door in the land of its birth, Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, the party that was the political vehicle in the process of realizing Pakistan out of British India embarked on the road to its demise almost as soon as Pakistan came into being. A whole range of scholarly writings has explored a whole range of aspects that led to the League's debacle, and, undoubtedly, others will emerge in the future. Ahmed Kamal's *State Against the Nation* is among the more recent additions to this list.

Kamal begins with a personal recollection that is reprised in far greater magnitude in the political culture of Bangladesh. "My early memory of cartoons and campaign-songs portraying Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, and the Muslim League, the ruling party, as corrupt and autocratic has proved to be lasting." What is that French saying, translated into English: the more things change, the more they remain the same? That childhood experience grew into a profound query that he posed to himself: "...how did the aspirations of the ordinary people -- their demand for a better distribution of land, food and water -- get entangled with the larger problems of nationalism, democracy, party-politics and state repression that shaped the nature of the state and politics in East Bengal?" His quest for an answer has led him to the

following conclusion: "...the inherited colonial bureaucracy, unaccountable and non-transparent; and to a political party, unprepared and inadequate as a change agent. The party relied on the bureaucracy's wisdom for nation-building and surrendered its leadership to the functionaries of the state."

The author concentrates on the bureaucratic angle as a key factor in the ML going downhill almost as soon as it had succeeded in achieving Pakistan. *State Against the Nation*, which studies Pakistan, particularly East Bengal, politics from 1947 to 1954, grew out of the author's PhD dissertation. He undertook the study out of "a feeling of dissatisfaction over the stagnation that seems to have set in in East Pakistan scholarship, especially since the emergence of Bangladesh."

The author's view is that, in most scholarly discourses, the Language Movement, provincial autonomy, and decline in jute prices dominate over matters of politics in East Pakistan. He undertakes to show there were other factors that contributed as much to Bengali disenchantment with ML and, concomitantly, with the political framework of East Pakistan. Kamal locates the process of control over land, food and water as being instrumental in the evolution of an authoritarian system in East Pakistan (as well as the whole of Pakistan, but that aspect is very tangentially touched in a book that is devoted to East Pakistan) that "continually quashed" an "elementary popular urge towards participation in the political process." ML failed as a political party essentially because it was not a politically experienced organization that had been engaged in any 'sustained, mass-based, anti-imperialist politics.' This dearth in political experience often left the East Pakistan politicians dependent



State Against the Nation
The Decline of the Muslim League in
Pre-independence Bangladesh,
1947-54
Ahmed Kamal
The University Press Limited

on the organized civilian relic of the British Indian colonial ruling instrument: the bureaucracy. "The result was a political culture where the bureaucracy emerged as the predominant and most enduring element."

The citizenry's disillusionment with ML was manifested in the first general election held in East Pakistan on 8 March 1954, where ML was routed, winning just ten out of the 237 Muslim seats in the Provincial Assembly. "So what went wrong in 1954?" the author asks. "Why did the Muslim League completely eclipse as a political party?" After all, ML never regained its preeminence in the land of its birth after that disaster. Kamal's principal arguments are encapsulated in the introductory chapter; the individual chapters following, up to the Epilogue, which deals with a pithy and rather superficial account of

the political experience of Bangladesh (it seems to have been included almost as an afterthought, as a concession to the situation in this country), elaborate on them. An interesting citation captures the frustration that concerned ML activists themselves felt about their party and its appalling governance. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed had lamented in *Durbhaga Jonosadharan*: "When shall we get an ideal ruler like Hazrat Omar, when the era of the Four Caliphs will come back." They were pining for a system of just and honest administration, which the citizens had expected from a homeland that they had so ardently struggled to achieve.

Kamal discusses at length the politics of food that contributed significantly to famine conditions prevailing in parts of East Bengal, the stupefying levy system that created more problems than solutions, the government's denial that famine existed in any part of the country (sound familiar?), the bureaucrats' high-handedness that exacerbated the problem, and the social class structure that was instrumental in giving rise to, and maintaining, it. The author often brings up the issue of a skewed class structure in not only having an impact on the price-induced famine, but also in the other areas of discussion, like the politics of scarcity, peasants and the agrarian question, water, and the police. In this context, his observation is worth noting: "In fact, whenever the private interests of elite groups and the community interests were at conflict, the state sided with the former." Simultaneously, as already stated, Kamal blames the bureaucracy for having contributed to the failure in the establishment of a healthy and vibrant political culture in the country, which had a direct impact, among other deleterious

effects, on the ML's demise. His observations in one situation is worth quoting: "Ignoring the opinion of political activists and some experts that to tame the rivers, to construct embankments and drainage channels, to excavate the silted tanks and canals called for giant efforts of human labour, the Muslim League government unhesitatingly adopted a bureaucratic approach to water management." And, what was a crucial aspect of bureaucratic mentality? "In keeping with the tradition of his colonial training, he described the peasants as 'desperate' and 'dangerous' by nature."

State Against the Nation, one feels, began with a bang in the initial couple of chapters, raising expectations of groundbreaking revelations and analyses pertaining to the decline of ML as a political force in East Pakistan. However, the explanatory chapters at times meander along at sluggish pace, where details of individual cases to prove a generalization have not been able to satisfactorily bring that feeling about, and the later efforts occasionally feel like they have ended in a whimper. Nonetheless, it is a book worth reading and cogitating over for the insights into the elitist politics of ML, quite divorced from the masses it should have served, and the various factors that led to its marginalization in the land of its birth. Kamal's assessment of the party as it hurtled towards destruction is significant: "Opportunism became the only means of advancing one's own political status, and the Muslim League began to develop a sycophantic political style."

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The sorrows of lonely women

Jackie Kabir is touched by some tales of sadness

DOHON O Droher Golpo is a collection of thirteen stories about women, all of whom suffer in life and in death. As they suffer they also revolt against the norms of society, a society that is oppressive towards them. It humiliates them, tortures them and then stands up high with pride. As if the whole world is just created for men to rule over their counterparts. In the name of religion they both torture and squash them in their very own home. Society is against women who stand up to protest their malpractices. We all see it around us. It is these writers who paint it on their canvases, make it possible for everyone to understand it better. More than a dozen women are depicted who were really the victims of our modern day society. The male members of their family, even the very near and dear ones, do not spare women when it comes to finding faults with them.

Writers like Anwara Syed Haq, Selina Hossain and Rizia Rahman have portrayed how the female members of the family are always looked upon as a piece of property, a mere utility in the home. Syed Haq's protagonist a young girl, has to abide by her husband and clad herself in a burkha to cover her beautiful countenance and her body. She can wear

her favourite sari only once when her husband is asleep in the next room. In Selina Hossain's story an elderly person gets married to a much younger woman, who revolts in ways his first wife couldn't even dream of. Minhazuddin's daughter from the first marriage reminds him how it used to be with her mother. The father then was an autocrat. Rizia Rahman's story *Kande Ma Faema* shows how getting independent with the help of the NGOs can become a curse for a poor woman. The powerful men of the village can destroy everything she has built through years of toil in hours, even minutes. Similarly Amiron's life in Jahanara Noori's long short story revolves around getting married. She has to get married a second time when her first husband dies as it is improper for a young woman to stay alone. All her family members decide that for her, without ever asking her what she wants. Undoubtedly that is the case of a lot of women in Bangladesh.

Ummu Muslima has demonstrated how the effect of conflict between parents can cripple a child's juvenile mind. Rabea Khatun in *Vanga Biver Kone* and Shahin Akhter have written about expatriate marriages which end tragically in most cases, a common enough happening in Bangladeshi society. Parents are



Dohon O Droher Golpo
Jahanara Nuri
Uttsho Prokashon

overwhelmed with pride and joy when their daughters get suitors who live overseas. Akhter's heroine commits suicide, according to her husband. But that may have been in fact a murder. In *Brikko Pura*, Papree Rahman shows how a young girl's aspirations and dreams get crushed under the weight of society. A tree which was planted on Paribanu's birthday is trying to reach the sky. They share the same fate of getting sacrificed for the family's well being. The tree is sold and Paribanu is

molested by an influential man's son; and as the matter is exposed. The family is offered thirty thousand taka as compensation. The author aptly shows how Paribanu's sister is happy at her misery. *Brikko Pura* is also a testimony of women being dishonoured by their own gender.

Five male writers have contributed to *Dohon O Droher Golpo* with very strong messages. The first story, written by Syed Shamsul Haq, *Kothai Ghumabe Karimon Bawa*, is about a female corpse which is brought to the village of Jolleshwari. A young boy and an elderly male relative are with the corpse. One of them leaves the scene on the second day. The cadaver remains on the steps of the *mazar* for three days. No one knows for sure why the body has not been buried in the woman's home village. Upon enquiry it is found that she worked for a man who was opposed to the ruling party. After her death from natural causes the man being very powerful does not allow her body to be buried in her own village. Hence the journey. Hasan Hafizur Rahman writes about two widows who live in their husbands' home (they are brothers). They once played as young girls and shared everything. They do the same in their old age. Only they have traveled the route of

life, life with the deaths of their children, husbands and a war that leaves them scarred for a lifetime. *Jojongondha*, a flower that does not smell nice but rather irritates the whole locality by its foul smell, is another tale. The smell comes from the poetry notebook of a writer. There is a symbolic (Gashful, Kishori O Janala Oppakhan) story which shows how a village is divided by the idea of whether the houses should have windows or not. The dwellers split regarding the issue of windows to such an extent that it seems a war is imminent. The last story how is about a woman afflicted by domestic violence. A young boy from the neighborhood helps her to run away from her home. She seems to be in a trance while the bus she is on moves. All the thirteen stories in *Dohon O Droher Golpo* seem to deviate from the norms of society as each deals with a certain problem in our society, a problem we are all aware of but seldom do anything about. Maybe writing about issues like child abuse, acid violence and divorce will sensitize people and thus help bring about a change at least in the way of thinking of the people of our country?

Jackie Kabir is a teacher and reviewer.

African males go to Europe

Charles Larsen enjoys a story

EARLY in Tahar Ben Jelloun's eye-opening novel of Arab illegals crossing from Tangier into southern Spain, the author describes a cat that sneaks aboard a ship headed across the Straits of Gibraltar: "Even the cat was fed up; he, too, wanted something else from life, and needed tenderness, caresses, a kind family who would spoil him. The cat wanted to go away because he knew instinctively that it was better 'over there, and he had his obsessions like everyone else, coming stubbornly every day to try his best to jump onto [a vessel bound for Europe]".

There are other ways, of course, for North Africans to gain entry into southern Europe legally. In many instances they offer more risk (and certainly more humiliation) than being smuggled across the Straits. These are the concerns of Jelloun's brutally honest narrative which focuses as much on innocence corrupted as it does on the perilous situation of millions of young men and women in nations around the world trapped between idealism and economic reality. Too often, there are no jobs to keep them in their own countries, where they have been educated and then forgotten.

Azel, Jelloun's main character, has been to the university in Morocco and has earned his legal degree but can't find any work. His sister, Kenza, who has acquired an education well beyond that of her female peers, is also stuck in a dead end. Both want to leave Morocco. As their would-be patron, Miguel, states, "When a country gets to the point that the 'best' of its children want to leave, it's a terrible thing."

Yet, Miguel, who is Spanish, also takes advantage of their vulnerability, and it is in their exploitation that *Leaving Tangier* takes a darker turn, bringing up a largely forbidden topic in Muslim societies: homosexuality. Miguel will help Azel get a work permit in Spain in return for sexual favors. Azel is naive enough to believe that it'll just be a matter of time before he'll be able to dump his patron and stay on in Spain, returning to his previously heterosexual life. Azel is even happy for a while, still plotting to break away from Miguel, whom he convinces to "marry" his sister so that she'll be able to gain legal entry into Spain. Both siblings believe that sometime in the future, they'll return to Morocco rich and successful.

It doesn't take too long until Azel begins living a double life, sneaking away from Miguel--initially, to be with female prostitutes and then, eventually, developing a steady relationship with a woman, principally to convince himself that he's still attracted to women. Intentionally, Azel becomes careless about these relationships, knowing that if Miguel learns of them, he'll be hurt. More accurately, Azel wants

to be caught because he wants to end his relationship with Miguel. Then, to his surprise, Azel discovers that he's impotent with women.

Jelloun treats these sexual issues unflinchingly, clearly knowing that they will trouble many of his Middle Eastern readers. He also mentions the earlier variant of trafficking in virile, young men not just Moroccans, but also Senegalese, Cameroonian, even Turks who play lesser roles in his story, particularly in their relationships with Azel's sister. Ironically, a pattern has been reversed. In the past, it was European men who settled in North Africa where they could enter more discreetly into relationships with other men than they could in their own countries. Today, this is often reversed: African males go to Europe, where they can be more comfortable with their homosexuality than at home. And women? Their degradation is similar.

There's not a false note in



Leaving Tangier
Tahar Ben Jelloun
Trans. Linda Coverdale
Penguin

Jelloun's riveting story. I confess that I peeked ahead to the title of the final chapter ("Returning") before I actually reached it. And I became a bit smug in my assumption that Jelloun was going to produce a happy ending for his bleak story. That was not the case, nor will I reveal more about his narrative, denying you the many interesting twists and turns of Jelloun's often astonishing story. One important sub-plot, however, is the novel's examination of Islamic fundamentalism, its attractiveness to restless youths in Muslim countries (and in Europe) who have little hope of economic success in a world often stacked against them.

Close to the end of *Leaving Tangier*, Azel reflects on his situation: "I was ready to do anything to get out of Morocco." How many young men and women in other countries feel exactly the same? What is their lot today during an international economic collapse?

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