The Moon, Old Women and Quislings

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The moon has since the beginning of time been an integral component of our consciousness. And since man began to walk the earth, it has taken on a dimension the appeal of which has not diminished nor looks about to diminish any time soon. Those among us who went to school in the 1960s cannot easily forget the frantic manner in which the United States and the Soviet Union tried to beat each other to the lunar orb, all of which was a testament to man's increasing knowledge about his place in the universal scheme of things and his desire to step out of earth and observe how it all was away from our planet.

America's astronauts and the Soviet Union's cosmonauts have died in the quest to reach the moon. In the event, it was the Americans who won the race when Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin became the first human beings to step on the moon and walk on it, in kangaroo-like fashion. The moment was pungent with electricity. The soul was filled with excitement of a rare sort. Even so, for poets and lovers around the world, the moon after July 1969 — that was when Apollo 11 took those two men to the earth's satellite — was not to be the same. Who after all would wish to describe the face of his beloved in terms of lunar beauty when human footsteps had been planted on the sandy surface of the moon?

And yet, for some men intent on spreading the lie as an art form, the moon has been a convenient instrument to beguile the naïve and the ignorant. The idea was bandied about, years after 1969, that having seen the moon split right down the middle, Armstrong had become a Muslim. The story was simply not true and the astronaut went to extraordinary lengths to deny that he had experienced anything of the kind or that he had cast his Christianity aside in favour of Islam. So that was that, until a few weeks ago when the gullible, in a place called Bogra, began to be enthused by the image of a 1971 collaborator of the Pakistan occupation army in Bangladesh appearing on the moon. It was pretty interesting as well as bizarre, in two ways. The first is that in their frenzy to promote their man, the collaborator's acolytes felt no qualms about lying, which is a grave sin in Islam and in every other religion. In the second, the fact that a lot of people actually believed the nonsense only demonstrated the deep pockets of ignorance which yet dot the landscape in Bangladesh. In this day and age . . .? You do not have any answer to the question.

The moon, if you recall, came to be associated with us when we were babies. Our mothers used to sing to us of 'chaanda mama', of his alighting from the nocturnal sky to place a 'teep' on our foreheads and so lull us to sweet slumber. In our waking hours, if the full moon happened to be around, we would be told that the dark spot on the moon was actually an old woman spinning yarn, a job she was destined to do till the end of time. In our late teenage, sometimes in our early twenties, we discovered that the dark spot was but a mark of shame, *kolonko*. And we made that discovery through literature when the wounded ego-driven male protagonist hit his lover, leaving a mark on her forehead and informing her in no uncertain terms that it was her *kolonko*, much like the dark spot on the moon, something with which she would live thereafter.

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Go back to the collaborator on the moon. It was blasphemy at its worst. It was an indecent assault on Islam, whose founder the Holy Prophet and his *sahaba-e-karam* would have taken prompt action in bringing this man and his fans to heel. That a group of politicians thought nothing of this apostasy and indeed went ahead to project him and his murderous party as a symbol of Islam is a