

Qur'an and the 'Divine Writ': Islam in the 'Writing Process' of Contemporary British Muslim Fiction

Rafat Ali is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Jadavpur University. He completed his early education in Kalimpong and Sikkim and higher education in Kolkata. Under the supervision of Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri, he obtained his PhD from Jadavpur University working on the representation of Islam and the Muslim world in medieval and early modern travel writing. He has since then contributed to this area of study through various publications and conference papers at national and international conferences, panel discussions, special lectures and as resource person at several Refresher Courses and workshops. In 2010 he received a Short Research Visit Grant from Charles Wallace India Trust and was also invited by the St. Philips Center for Inter-Faith Relations at Leicester, UK to deliver a talk on 'Crusades, Conversion and Co-existence in Medieval Travel Writing'. His recent publications include, 'Islam and Early Modern Orientalism' in JUES vol.22 ed. Ananda Lal and 'On the Road to Dar-al-Shahadah' in *Believing and Belonging* ed. A. R.Kidwai (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2016).

Abstract

The Qur'an, meaning 'Reading', is not a closed corpus but, as a perennial process of the 'Divine writing' and 'rewriting,' is God's response to the actualities and circumstances of human beings. It tells us that the act of Reading and the use of the pen are associated with 'what he [man] knew not' - meaning that the idea of knowledge is one that is yet to be discovered. Research and discovery are essential for Reading the *ayat* or 'signs of God'. Right from the first revealed verse, the Qur'an lays the foundation of a culture and society based on reading and writing, research, penmanship, communication and transmission of knowledge. Any society that does not demonstrate these traits cannot be said to be upholding the ideals of Islam. The reality of the Muslim world today, in its present state of decline and marginalization, however, does not live up to this ideal. At a time when current global debates on the 'war on terrorism' has become synonymous with the 'war on Islam', and Muslims all over the world are increasingly being framed within discourses of terrorism, in terms of 'belonging, otherness, and threat', the role of Muslims as 'conceptually evolving' is more important than anything in combating not only the narrow interpretations of Islam but also Western liberal secularism as well. Taking up the example from contemporary British Muslim fiction I seek to explore here how 'imaginative writing' tries to understand, negotiate and come to terms with 'Divine writing' and also how émigré Muslims in their present, and probably perpetual, state of 'otherness' discover enriching perspectives of living the Qur'an.

Keywords: *Qur'an*, Islam, British Muslim Fiction, Writing, Modernity

The apparent incongruity of the title of Michael Allen Gillespie's book, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008) is unsettling in many ways. In the 'Preface' to the book he gives the modern age its two most lasting visual images of collapse which affirms as well as questions the modern project.¹ The first is the fall of the Berlin Wall which razed the space between a totalitarian and a free world opening a new vista of liberal future of peace and progress. The second is the fall, rather collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre which suddenly exposed the dark alleys which had been ridden roughshod by modernity, and from where dark figures had emerged with vengeance. Branding these dark figures as anti-modern and fanatics, particularly religious fanatics, is not enough because it leaves the nature, and more importantly the source

¹ Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008)

of fanaticism, unexplained. Beneath the challenge of understanding these 'others' and perhaps even 'ourselves', says Gillespie, lies the bigger challenge of understanding the place of religion and religious belief. Among other things, modernity also begins by displacing religion and replacing it with secular authority, science and reason which promises to usher in equality, liberty, freedom, toleration, pluralism and such benefits. And the adequacy of such promises now has been thrown into doubt. The rest of the book is a profound reflection on the paths of modernity and religion which crisscross at various meeting points of mergers and departures – not just of the West with its own religious past but also with Islam and the Muslim world. The present paper is situated somewhere in such intersecting paths with the aim of understanding religious belief in Islam as provided through the Qur'an.

The paper has been divided into three sections. The first makes a comparison between the ideal Islamic society as envisioned in the Qur'an and the historical reality of the Muslim world today in its present 'painful' state of stagnation, general decline and marginalization with regard to modernity. The second section seeks an explanation for this present state of malaise – not with the intention of actually answering a question like 'what went wrong' but only to emphasize the question and put it into a proper perspective. It attempts to understand the nuances of what 'rethinking and re-interpreting Islam' means in relation to the guidance available in the form and structure of the Qur'an. What is the Qur'an and how does it offer itself as a "Book" or rather "Speech of God"? How does it refer to itself and its authority and what lessons are there in its "Divine Writing" regarding contingent problems as and when they emerge in different ages and different places? These are some of the basic questions that need to be necessarily raised. The third section deals with the attempts to overcome this state of pain and malaise in 'imaginative writings' particularly literary fiction by émigré Muslims in the West, not as its victims or beneficiaries but active contributors and participants of it. In this they not only negotiate with their changed and new circumstances but also make sense of it while coming to terms with "Divine Writing", seen not as a closed corpus but as a continuous and ongoing process of guidance for humanity.

I

I will begin with that momentous 'event'² of the twenty seventh night of the Islamic month of Ramadan, CE 611. A reclusive forty year old man named Mohammed, distressed with the corrupt and unjust society of his time had been retreating in prayers and deep contemplation in a cave in Mount Hira near Makkah when he 'received' the first verses – referred to as *ayat* (signs) - of the Qur'an.

Read! In the name of your Lord who created:

He created man from a clinging form.

Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One

Who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know. (96:1-5)³

² I have borrowed this term from Kenneth Cragg in his book *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in its Scripture* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971 rpt.1994). He refers to the Qur'an not only as a document but also as event.

³ *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 428.

The Arabic word used here for 'Read' is *Iqra* also translated as 'Proclaim'. What the revelatory event actually was remains a matter of faith and belief but it was beyond a normal instance of linguistic communication. Ziauddin Sardar explains the *Iqra* as an 'idea of conscious taking-in, with or without an audible utterance but with a view to understanding the words and ideas being received from an outside source – here the message of the Qur'an'.⁴ He further explains that the '*kalam*' – pen - conveys the idea of communication of all knowledge (by means of any technology). The 114 *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an are thus distinct and independent units of communication. And what is the message to be communicated? The first revealed *surah* also puts this into perspective as it celebrates both the pen and the act of reading – for both are associated with 'what he [man] knew not'. To quote Sardar here:

The phrase contains the idea of knowledge as one that is yet to be discovered – thus conveying both the notion of research and the idea of accumulative knowledge. Research and discovery are essential for reading, in the words of the Qur'an 'the signs of God' and the ability to communicate and transmit, by means of written record, thoughts, experiences and insights from individual to individual, from generation to generation and from one cultural environment to another is of utmost importance here.⁵

Kenneth Cragg in his profound analysis of the translation of Divine scripture for human reality in his *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (1985), had explained the process entailed in the first revealed verse of the Qur'an as an instance where '[M]ankind is taught by that which is at once the lesson and the instrument. The pen's first inscribing the Qur'an, in its collection through the years of Muhammad's mission and its recensions after his death, bequeathed to the commentators the task of its interpretation as the Book of its people.'⁶ The Qur'an, literally translated, means 'Reading' or 'Recital' and the text in the reciter's sequences passes into the context of the reader's world. Cragg further explains that calligraphy is the first sacred duty of the pen, but no less second is the commentary. The sense of possessing the scripture is the core of the Islamic faith but no less important is the sense the scripture possesses.⁷

I have here pointed out the principle or method contained in the first revealed verse or *ayat* to describe the nature of the 'text' of the Divine writ – there are many scattered in other sections of the Qur'an.

[Prophet] do not rush to recite before the revelation is fully complete but say, 'Lord increase my knowledge!' (20:114)⁸

Say, [T]ravel throughout the earth and see how He brings life into being: and He will bring the next life into being. God has power over all things. (29:20)⁹

⁴ Inayatullah, Sohail, and Gail Boxwell eds. *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader*, (London, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2003), 90.

⁵ Inayatullah, Sohail.

⁶ Cragg, Kenneth. *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 1.

⁷ Cragg, Kenneth.

⁸ *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.

⁹ *The Qur'an*, 253.

The purpose is to draw attention to the type of society for which the Qur'an lays foundation. It is one based on reading and writing, research, penmanship, communication and transmission of knowledge. Any society that does not demonstrate these traits cannot be said to be upholding the ideals of Islam.

The reality, however, of the Muslim world today, in its present state of decline and marginalization is a painful one that does not live up to this Qur'anic ideal. At strife with itself and with the world at large, Islam seems to have become what Bernard Lewis and his protégé Samuel Huntington, in their spurious neo-orientalist 'clash of civilizations' theory defined as the other of 'civilization' – if by 'civilization' and modernity we mean that which is represented by the West. Ziauddin Sardar has made a profound observation on the events of 11 September 2001, as revealing more than anything else, the distance Muslims have travelled away from the spirit and import of Islam. Far from being a liberating force, a kinetic social, cultural and intellectual dynamic for equality, justice and human values, Islam seemed to have internalized what the false western representations had done to demonize them for centuries.¹⁰ The lot of Muslim, either as minorities or as mainstream people, all over the world is representative of this state of things gone wrong. At a time when current global debates on the war on terror and the inhumanity of the detention camps - which Giorgio Agamben has aptly compared with the Nazi concentration camps in his concept of 'state of exception'¹¹ - has become synonymous with 'war on Islam', and Muslims all over the world are being framed within discourses of terrorism, in terms of belonging, otherness and 'threat', the role of discerning and concerned Muslims as a conceptually evolving category is more important than anything in combating not only the narrow interpretations of Islam but also western modernity and liberal secularism as well.

II

The Muslim response to what is broadly referred to as 'the challenge of modernity' is seen as two-fold: firstly, its resistance to Western colonialism, its worldview, and its culture; and secondly, the mobilization within the community to rejuvenate its lost traditions. The history of the transition from the attempt to revive piety to the revival of political power is a complex one which may not be possible to recount here. The most unfortunate aspect of this confrontation is the creation of a pan-Islamic consciousness of victimhood and the idea of an *ummah* in a spirit of conflict – fuelled by an interpretation of *jihad*, directed towards exterminating an enemy, that is 'outside' rather than within. This is conceived not as a process of spiritual development, but as a campaign against a hostile force responsible for the Muslim world's current state of subservience.

The two terms used frequently within the revivalist circles – *tajdid* and the more misunderstood *jihad* – are primarily concerned with questions like – how can Muslims remain true to the essential teachings of a fourteen hundred year old monotheistic tradition, while also enhancing their ability to engage with the modern world and overcome experiences of marginalization and decline? And more importantly, what can contemporary Islamic interpretation offer in response to issues like political participation, democracy, human rights, terrorism, non-violence, peacemaking and inter-cultural dialogue? The first and foremost reason why Muslims are so

¹⁰ Sardar, Ziauddin. 'Rethinking Islam', *Seminar*, (Janury2002), 48.

¹¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

uncomfortable with modernity is because they have been comfortably relying or falling back on age old interpretations for too long. And so change and rethinking is long overdue. Today however, few topics are more controversial than interpreting Islam. In the West as well as in the Muslim world, this business has become a virtual cottage industry, including a diverse range of terrorism experts, government policy makers, journalists, religious and political scholars and so on. In the epigraph of the concluding chapter titled 'The Importance of Being Islamic' of his book *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2015) Shahab Ahmed summarizes poetically the spirit of his profound work with these memorable lines from the poet Munir Niazi:

'What account of my deeds to anyone, could I give?
All the questions were wrong, what answers could I give?'¹²

The book itself, posthumously published after the author's early and tragic demise, according to him is 'an attempt to put forward a conceptualization of Islam as a theoretical object and an analytical category that maps meaningfully onto Islam as a human and historical phenomenon'. It was 'provoked by the sense that the existing conceptualization of Islam – whether as a religion, as culture, as civilization, as discursive tradition, as core beliefs, as whatever-Muslims-say-it-is, as a law-centered phenomenon, as so plural and various to be "islams-not-Islam"' – have in various ways failed to convey the fullness of the reality of what it is that has actually been (and is) going on in historical societies of Muslims living as Muslims. And particularly in the West, since I am going to refer to British Muslim fiction – a question posed to Tony Blair immediately after the 7/7 London bombings, to which many sought an answer desperately. 'How could people who grew up here, received their education here, enjoyed cricket, enjoyed so much about British life, have turned on their own people?'¹³

Shahab Ahmad's question is of course rhetorical. However, a likely response I would prefer to give is from the introductory chapter of Abdul Aziz Said's *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic not Static* (2006):

'The history of Islam is a story of never-ending efforts on the part of Muslims to comprehend the ideals of the Qur'an, and then to transform this understanding into a lived reality. In this dynamic process, the ideals of Islam are not static but emergent. Every historical period and cultural milieu has given a different synthesis of Islamic command. Every generation in the Muslim world develops a unique yet integral Islamic synthesis which distinguishes that generation from previous ones.'¹⁴

The answer to the second question is definitely not the one provided by Samuel Huntington's 'the clash of civilizations'. In the book bearing that title, Huntington wrote, 'The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people is convinced of the superiority of their culture and is obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people is convinced of the universality of their culture and

¹² As quoted in Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 542

¹³ Raghavan, R.K. 'Probing the British Muslim'. *Frontline Online* 22, no. 17 (2005), 13-26.

¹⁴ Said, Abdul Aziz, Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Meena Sharify-Funk, *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static* (London: Routledge, 2006), 9.

believes that superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflicts between Islam and the West¹⁵. Huntington's mentor, Bernard Lewis, considered to be one of the best scholars of Islamic history in one of his influential journalistic writings in the *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, titled 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', characterized Muslims as one terrifyingly collective person enraged at an outside world that has disturbed his primeval calm and unchallenged rule. John Esposito, responding to this polemical and misconceived image of Islam wrote,

The message and impact of "The Roots of Muslim Rage" is reinforced by the picture on the front cover of the *Atlantic Monthly*, portraying a scowling, bearded, turbaned Muslim with American flags in his glaring eye. The threat motif and confrontational tone are supplemented by the two pictures used in the article, ostensibly presenting the quintessential Muslim perception of America as the enemy. The first is of a serpent marked with the stars and stripes seen crossing a desert (America's dominance of or threat to the Arab world); the second shows the serpent poised as if to attack from behind an unsuspecting pious Muslim at prayer. Like other sensationalist stereotypes, these pictures are meant to be provocative, to attract the reader, feed into our ignorance and reinforce a myopic vision of the reality. Muslims are attired in 'traditional' dress, bearded and turbaned, despite the fact that most Muslims (and most 'fundamentalists') do not dress or look like this. The result reinforces the image of Islamic activists as medieval in life-style and mentality.¹⁶

There is no doubt that western, particularly American foreign policies in West Asia is largely responsible for the present state of conflicts, but to blame it solely or talk about a notion of modernity that is alien to Muslims within which they feel painfully uncomfortable and 'othered' is a lazy option. Hegemony, says Sardar, is not always imposed but invited, and the internal situation within Islam and the Muslim world is an open invitation¹⁷. The reaction of the radicals mostly has been *jihād* – a narrow distorted version of it but what is required urgently is an *ijtihad* – a sincere exertion towards renewal. And the reason why *ijtihad* has failed to be summoned is because Muslims have failed to connect the text with their contexts. The Qur'an and the examples of the prophet – which are absolute 'frames of reference', have become frozen in history. The interpretation of text will make no sense if the context is of a different age and place¹⁸. The Qur'an is also well aware of those of deviant hearts, desiring to strain the interpretation in line with their deviance, and obscure the intention of its Scripture. To such hazards its stand is that of reproach and the ultimate interpretation is known only to God:

'Believers, avoid making too many assumptions' 49:12¹⁹

Speaking of the intention of the Scripture, Cragg writes that it is an 'intention which, in the human situation for which revelation itself is given, must necessarily engage with the intentions

¹⁵ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 217-218.

¹⁶ Esposito, John. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 220.

¹⁷ Sardar, Ziauddin. 'Rethinking Islam', *Seminar*, (January 2002): 48-51.

¹⁸ Sardar, Ziauddin.

¹⁹ *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 339.

of the reader'²⁰. Historic interpretations however drag Muslims back to ossified contexts and at times even to romanticized ones of empire and earthly glory. In this condition of not recognizing their context, interpretation lacks commitment. The result is that Muslims have a strong emotional attachment to Islam but as a worldview and a system – which demands a dual role of the mind and the heart – of 'chant' as well as 'calligraphy' in the form of its worship – it has no direct relevance in their daily lives apart from the outward concerns of ritual and worship. In this regard Sardar sums up the Muslim condition as producing 'three metaphysical catastrophes': firstly, the elevation of the Shari'ah – commonly translated as Islamic law – to the level of the Divine; Second, the consequent removal of agency from the believers and thirdly, the equation of Islam with the modern conception of the State.

The shari'ah in itself is a human construct – human attempts at understanding Divine Will in particular contexts. They are expressed in legal opinions by classical jurists often competing and contradicting one another. They are more of problem solving methodologies rather than *a priori* laws. What remains constant is only the 'text' of the Qur'an – its concepts providing the anchor for changing interpretations. It does not provide ready-made answers to all human problems; but it provides a moral and just perspective within which Muslims must endeavor to find answers to all human problems²¹. With the shari'ah itself becoming divine rather than the Qur'an, Islam gets reduced to an ideology which can then be easily manipulated by vested groups and transformed into a State. In the hands of these vested groups Islam loses its humanity and becomes a battlefield where morality, reason and justice are replaced by boiling emotions of a past 'golden age' and present condition of 'painful othering'. The journey from such ideologies to totalitarian order of the deranged fundamentalists is a short one and the rest is history unfolding before our eyes today. The transformation of Islam into a state-based political ideology not only deprives it of all its moral and ethical content, it also debunks most of Muslim history as un-Islamic.

III

I now come to the third section of my paper which deals with the upsurge of forms of politicized Islam that have caused much disquiet in the West in recent times. It has been perceived as a 'problem' and 'threat' not only to Western liberal values but even to humanity and civilization in general.

The writer and activist A Sivanandan has said 'that the war on asylum and the war on terror...have converged to produce a racism which cannot tell a settler from an immigrant, an immigrant from an asylum seeker, an asylum seeker from a Muslim, and a Muslim from a terrorist.'²² Geoffrey Nash in *Writing Muslim Identity* (2012) reminds us that Islam is a religion, not an ideology, and there is no point ultimately in making war with a religion.²³ Though there has been a felt need, perceived by scholars in the West as well as in the Muslim world,

²⁰ Cragg, Kenneth. *The Pen and the Faith*, 2.

²¹ Ziauddin Sardar, 'Rethinking Islam': 64-81

²² Sivanandan, A. 'Race, Terror and Civil Society', *Race and Class* 47.3 (January 2006): 1-8. As quoted in Stephen Morton, 'Writing Muslims and the Global State of Exception' in Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin eds. *Culture, Diaspora and Modernity in Muslim Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 18.

²³ Nash, Geoffrey. *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012), Introduction. Kindle.

to revise the hegemonic understanding of religion, within the discourse of secularism (here I use the word secularism to emphasize its difference from secularity which is a broader notion) there has been a rampant production of new regimes of knowledge that survey, regulate and criminalize (not just) particular Muslim groups but Islam in general. Nash's distinction needs to be seen in response to these 'new regimes of knowledge' produced in media discourses and literary texts, mostly fiction (both with popular base and a wide readership). Stephen Morton writes that developments in the 'post 9/11 novels' have tended to contribute to the pernicious stereotypes about Muslims by suggesting that Islam, the religion itself, is the cause of political violence and have averted the latent ways in which Muslim peoples have been the victims of violent foreign policies in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

Nash's aim, however, is not to categorize Muslim identities as traditional, moderate or radical but look for images, particularly by migrant Muslim writers responding to the shift since the last few decades in the perception of Muslims, living as minorities in the West, from being an ethnic group or a collection of ethnic groups to a distinct religious category.

So how have Muslim writers attempted to counter these fictions? If we take the case of Britain specifically, Nash says that the 'public awareness of Muslim presence coincided with the agitation against Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) which, it has been argued, was fanned by an Islamist agenda of international proportions. As a result, a *kulturkampf* (a cultural struggle) against Islam has been invoked with the aim of refuting and nullifying the perceived 'Islamic threat' to Western values, in the process reasserting these values as universals constitutive of the entire programme of modernity.²⁴ In the recent so called 'resurgence of Islam', especially amongst the second and third generation migrant Muslim youth, where 'religious revival develops by decoupling itself from cultural references...Islam is seen not as a cultural relic but as a religion that is universal and global'²⁵. This turn is seen by multiculturalism, which posits an inherent link between religion and culture, as a problem and a threat. Most contemporary fiction by Muslims like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Qureishi and Monica Ali, living in the West reiterate these distortions of the 'resurgence of Islam' by conflating religion and ethnicity, while making Islam and Islamic beliefs the focus of their writings. The language that they seek, within the discourse of post-coloniality is prone to what Kwame Anthony Appiah has defined as comprador intelligentsia of the 'native informants'.²⁶ It appropriates the literatures of non-Western peoples in the way that is complicit with the Western neo-imperialist agenda and even participates in the *Kulturkampf*, consciously or unconsciously, against the 'Islamic threat'.

Claire Chambers the author of *Contemporary British Muslim Fiction* and Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin and Rehana Ahmed, the editors of *Culture, Diaspora and Modernity in Muslim Writing* are, however, hopeful and suggest that the emergent sub-genre of the British Muslim Fiction, offers interesting counterpoints too to the stereotypical views about Muslims and Islam. One such work that comes to my mind is Robin Yassin-Kassab's narrative of quest for meaning and fulfillment in his debut novel *The Road from Damascus* (2008) particularly because of the symbolic title with

²⁴ Nash, Geoffrey.

²⁵ Nash, Geoffrey.

²⁶ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?'. *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991), 348.

the significant twist of punctuation,²⁷ The turning point in the life of Saul, who became Paul, after a life-changing vision 'on the road to Damascus', and the transformation of a bloody mission of persecuting thousands of Christians by this Jewish general into spreading the Christian faith has been the subject of numerous writers. Paul's dramatic conversion, and his mission of taking Christianity to the Gentile world of the Roman Empire, from where, a few centuries later - and with another vision of another Roman general - it emerged as a universal religion, is crucial to the history of Christianity. Yassin-Kassab's novel, with its significant twist in the title, drew my attention towards a cyclical pattern in the 'road to Damascus' event of transformation from a mission of persecution, to evangelization, to persecution again (and the ensuing escape from that persecution) of millions of Syrians at the hands of political extremism which continues today. The burning debates about the situation and crisis of migrants, from various parts of underdeveloped countries to the more developed ones - fleeing poverty or persecution - will remain always alive. And from the perspective of Islamic history one cannot forget the significance of migration - the hijrah with which the history of the first ummah begins. Given the fact that political extremists persecuting Muslims today are Muslims themselves (and the argument given of retaliating to Western foreign policies in no way justifies the means to the end), understanding the deeper significance of hijrah to the foundation of faith and community, of what it means to be a Muslim in such circumstances, is most urgent. At the same time, the reluctance of developed Western nations to accommodate these Muslims, with the already volatile situation of an 'Islamic resurgence' and the rising discontent amongst the migrant Muslims there (alleged to be fanned by an international Islamist agenda), heightens the crisis within the values of 'fellow-feeling' and 'natural sympathy' as the basis of moral and social life in the West. The role of 'feelings', rather 'natural feelings' as a bulwark against the confines of doctrinal thinking is crucial in safeguarding the freedom of the individual - the essence of secular humanism. The credibility of secular humanism, with its loss, is open to questions. These layers of 'loss of faith and faithlessness' - in religion and secular humanism - is reflected with serious concern in Yassin-Kassab's debut novel.

The novel through the life of a thirty-one year old Syrian 'failed academic and international layabout' Sami Traifi, explores the lives of Arabs in London addressing issues of migration, faith, identity, love and politics. He is, as the author himself describes in an explanatory essay, 'a rather annoying anti-hero'²⁸. Right at the onset of the novel the reader is introduced to this almost Quixotic figure, somewhat fallen from his ideal past, but kept alive by the spirit of quest towards the profound questions of being and becoming, meaning and fulfillment.

The entire quest theme of the novel narrates the story of the richness and glory of the Muslim past, the onslaught of Western modernity and the secularists' flirtation with new ideas before realizing its false hopes and limitations while being simultaneously unable to reconnect with the past because that has already been, as it were, hijacked by narrow interpretations of radical extremist groups. For Sami had hoped to return home (by the end of the novel we are quite unsure which one - London or Damascus), '[a]s a proper academic, like his father before him' where 'he'd be able to get it back on course, his place in the world, his marriage, his mother.

²⁷ Yassin-Kassab, Robin. *The Road from Damascus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008).

²⁸ Yassin-Kassab, Robin. 'Islam and the Writing Process', *Religion and Literature* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 139-144.

So he believed. A new idea, a turned leaf. It was this time, it was perhaps his last chance, to leave childish things behind'.²⁹

The reference to leaving 'childish things behind' is Kassab's brilliant reversal of the 'progress of history' envisioned in the Enlightenment discourses with its culmination in the Hegelian movement of history, like the sun, from the East to the West, and John Stuart Mill's relegating the Eastern world as being in the 'waiting room of history'.³⁰ The sense of progress, not as a condition but as a precondition, a standard process or dynamic of 'civilization' is crucial for understanding the modernity that originates from the European Enlightenment and undoubtedly is to be admired and emulated. For at its heart lies the penultimate human value of freedom and choice – which Muslims cannot miss as being God's greatest gift in several Qur'anic *surahs*:

'There is no compulsion in religion' (*al-Baqarah* 2.256)³¹

Addressing the Prophet, a verse says:

Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord, there is no God but Him. Turn away from those who join other gods with Him. If it had been God's will, they would not have done so, but We have not made you their guardian, nor are you their keeper.' (*al-Anam* 6.106-107).³² 'Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?' (*Yunus* 10.99)³³

²⁹ Yassin-Kassab, Robin. *The Road from Damascus*, chap 1. Kindle.

³⁰ Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

³¹ *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 29.

³² *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 88.

³³ *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 135.