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From Islamic Fundamentalism to a New Life in the West: Ali Eteraz and the Muslim Comedy Memoir

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The public fascination with 'the Muslim' has risen exponentially in recent years. Film, television, the theatre, and fiction have all seen an upsurge of interest in texts and productions purporting to shed light on Muslims, how they live and—most often—how they have come to be radicalised. In television, the years since 9/11 have seen an upsurge in drama series, such as *24*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *Homeland*, which have normalised the idea of a Muslim 'enemy within'. Conversely, in the realm of comedy, shows such as *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Citizen Khan* play with (and sometimes against) stereotypes to expose the 'ordinariness' of Muslim life when caught in absurd situations. However, both these forms—and countless others—operate in what Peter Morey and I have called a frame, encompassing Muslims and what can be said about them at the present time (Morey and Yaqin 2011: 18–43). They all respond, whether directly or indirectly, to a view of Muslims as alien and problematic, either confirming or contesting this notion. As such, the question of which Muslims can be trusted to speak becomes freighted with the agendas of a predominantly

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non-Muslim audience and media industry fixated with certain 'problems'. In a situation where, as Rehana Ahmed has said of literature, texts are chosen for publication in order to satisfy 'a mainstream readership's spurious desire to "know" the Muslim Other in the context of events such as 9/11 and 7/7', a premium is placed on the writer who can give us a true insight into the supposedly warped life of the modern Muslim subject (Ahmed 2015: 17). In this chapter, I look at a memoir by the Pakistani American author Ali Eteraz entitled, *Children of Dust: A Memoir of Pakistan*, published in 2009. I consider the destabilising generic hybridity of Eteraz's text which at once plays out with gusto the story of a radicalised Muslim while, at the same time, deploying at points a comedic tone that not only undercuts the serious confessional nature of the text but throws back onto the reader a degree of interpretative work in order to make a coherent message out of the different registers employed. In the end, the chapter suggests, Eteraz's destabilising tactics raise questions around readerly trust: can we trust what we are reading to obey the diktats of the governing frame and tell us what the path to (and from) radicalisation is like? And, more tellingly, can we trust that Eteraz is not, through his wry tone, sending up the whole project in which so much Western time, money, and obsessive interest are invested?

Children of Dust is a hybrid text that challenges both the conventional expectations of the memoir form, through its use of novelistic devices, and works to authenticate, but also satirise, the 'Muslim subjectivity' of the narrator. The book narrates the attempt to form trusting relations through the experiences of the protagonist, from his early expressions of piety through to his later Sufi-inspired liberal Muslim persona. Eteraz's protagonist is caught between the double bind of family/spiritual duty and free will as he tries to construct a persona that is modern and 'authentically Muslim'. With a wry humour, the memoir mimics the condition of 'postcolonial melancholia' for the diasporic Muslim subject in which a multicultural positivism is overtaken by the neo-imperial politics of the Global War on Terror. After 9/11, the protagonist finds himself responding to the call for a Muslim reformation. However, his plans are disrupted when a friend calls into question his understanding of the Sufi tradition he claims to embrace. The idea of knowing or not knowing the self is constantly at play in the memoir

unsettling the reader. The narrator's transformations have the effect of calling into question the very idea that there is a definitive Muslim subjectivity which can be captured and rendered to the non-Muslim reader in literary form. Eteraz's satirical representations of himself invite the reader to work against the grain of the now familiar Muslim fundamentalist-turned-Sufi story.

I will argue that it is in the text's deployment of humour that we can see traces of a potential multicultural coexistence and a rebuilding of social trust. In this interstitial space of comedy, Eteraz can be both modern and traditional. Paul Gilroy's reading of the humorous style adopted by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen (aka Ali G) offers a useful comparative route into understanding Ali Eteraz's edgy comedy writing style (Gilroy 2004: 144–53). Gilroy's analysis of the effects of laughter and satire as disruptive forces against the 'postcolonial melancholia' of a multicultural society that ridicules immigrants and strangers, helps the reader to locate the nuances of Eteraz's representation of Muslim stereotypes in an American publishing market.

One of the questions the Western fixation with Muslims throws up is their degree of trustworthiness. Onora O'Neill has argued what matters most is not trust in an abstract sense but how we measure the trustworthiness of people in particular respects (O'Neill 2002). What might be the shared values that underpin trust in a multicultural society and what are the limits of trustworthiness? Trust is a social transaction that can be shaped and understood through religious and ethical models of citizenship and morality. Marek Kohn suggests that trust is a 'practical attitude rather than a transcendent passion' (Kohn 2008: 9). The promise of trust requires mutual respect and goodwill and an openness to dialogue (Laden 2013). Modern nations foster trustworthiness in society through shared systems of public life, social justice, accountability, and human rights. This generalised model of trust works in tandem with policies of multiculturalism in ethnically diverse societies with the aim of building social cohesion across diverse groups. It is based on a particular set of reasonable values that may not be uniform across groups and can come into conflict with narrower community values. Trust is called into question when there is a failure of the systems that promote trustworthiness.

Kohn suggests that when a society does not have trust then expectations fall on individuals and families. In his reading, the family can become a problematic source for social trust when it comes to the building of community relations. In what he calls 'familistic' societies, power aims to produce loyalty to the family above everything else. Familistic loyalties are stronger than loyalty to the wider society. A classic example would be the mafia in Southern Italy. However, some migrant communities—Muslim among them—operate familistically, in Kohn's terms, as they tend to place trust within their own entrenched and marginalised networks. (One of the most prominent examples of this among Muslims in Britain would be the *biraderi* or clan-based system of family obligation which has come to be embedded in Muslim communities in the North of England. Here family loyalty and trust trumps allegiance to a wider society which Muslims already see as untrusting and thus untrustworthy.)[1]

In order to understand why mistrust might be associated with particular social groups in multicultural societies, I wish to turn to the sociologists Cvetkovich and Lofstedt who define social trust as an intrinsic value that people place in each other. It is based on confidence, involves an element of risk and is mediated through power. They refer to premodern and modern contexts of social trust, the former operating through interpersonal familial relationships and the latter through institutional systems as well as interpersonal relationships. Their argument is that traditional social trust in American society engenders social distrust because it maintains existing interests and encourages 'within group trust' and 'across group distrust': in other words, it discourages risk taking and mutual vulnerability across groups (Earle and Cvetkovich 1995: 19). They argue that American society nowadays operates through a model of distrust and places less value than previously on community networks that can contribute to a more complex formation of social trust—something also born out in Robert Putnam's classic study of late twentieth-century America, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000).

In my reading of *Children of Dust*, I suggest that the text reflects the clash of familial and associational patterns of trust and mistrust through a narrative that embodies the limits of cultural diversity at a turning point in history. The text represents attempts to build social trust from familistic, communitarian, and individualist perspectives. In fact, the memoir

plays out these negotiations in its plotting, character interactions, and form. In choosing to present his story in five books, corresponding to the stages in his journey from Pakistan to America, and from Islamic purism to a more hybrid sensibility, Eteraz employs what are more commonly considered novelistic devices, such as a Bildungsroman structure and use of an at times ironic voice. Trust also requires that we make ourselves vulnerable to each other. The risk of trusting is that one will be let down by the person in whom trust is being placed. Significantly, as he encounters a diverse group of people, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, Eteraz's narrator makes himself vulnerable to others, and is in return rewarded with trust or mistrust depending on the type of moral and ethical meanings he has constructed in the process of telling his story.

In his analysis of the popular American Television series *24*, Peter Morey draws on Tzvetan Todorov and his description of genres: 'They function as "horizons of expectation" for their audiences, who have some sense of what elements will go to make up the particular cultural package they are encountering' (Morey 2010: 256). In the case of the Muslim memoir, the 'horizon of expectation' is fairly narrow and the cultural package on offer is usually a straight forward translation of a narratable Muslim life which functions to offer the lay reader an explanation of Islam and of certain modes of Muslim behaviour. The specific question of form and the Muslim memoir has been analysed by Rehana Ahmed in her reading of British Muslim autobiographical memoirs by Ed Husain, Sarfraz Manzoor, Yasmin Hai, Zaiba Malik, and Shelina Zahra JanMohamed. She argues that it is 'the personal appeal of these autobiographical narratives, the individualism of their form, which endows them with the potential to communicate across cultural barriers but also delimits that communication' (Ahmed 2015: 209). Ahmed's insightful reading suggests how the form can 'intervene in Muslim-majority relations and mediate cross-cultural understanding in multicultural Britain' (2015: 184). However, this 'anthropological' expectation is never a neutral enterprise, and certain inclusions and omissions will impact on the degree of critical credence such texts receive. For instance, as Adrian Banting has shown, the felt need to include 9/11 in JanMohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* presents a peculiar digression from the main narrative of a young professional Muslim woman's search for a life partner; it is as if this point is

shoe-horned in as part of the bundle of expectations a Muslim writer will be obliged to meet (Banting 2017: unpublished PhD).

In the case of *Children of Dust*, such expectations appear acutely in both the narration and in the peritextual paraphernalia through which the book was marketed and received. What emerges is a narrative that is both responding to the commodification of the ethnic subject and presenting a critical voice that tries to dissect the perceived authenticity of the native informant. The popularity of Eteraz's memoir can be gauged from its reception of the Nautilus Gold Book award in 2010, its recommendation on the Fall 2009 reading list in *O*, the Oprah Winfrey magazine, and its listing as one of the *New Statesman*'s Books of the Year in 2009. In addition, the Library of Congress cataloguing keywords: 'Muslim—Biography; Radicalism—Religious aspects—Islam; Islamic fundamentalism; Religious awakening—Islam' encourages an instrumentalist reading of the story of what we expect to be the journey to enlightenment of a paradigmatically illiberal subject—the Pakistani Muslim American. The dust jacket shows a picture of a row of boys sitting behind a low bench reading the Qur'an in a *madrassa*. This establishes a particular stereotyped paratext for the narrative that is contained in the book, confirming the outsider status of the Muslim immigrant to America.

As a memoir that has been most aggressively and successfully marketed in the United States, *Children of Dust* captures the 'long-standing allure' that Farzaneh Milani has spoken of with reference to the popularity of the Iranian memoir in America. She notes the high sales of autobiographies, memoirs, and travelogues in the United States commenting that

> [p]ublic confessions of misfortune and hard-earned redemption, even from characters with ambiguous moral or legal status, seem to fascinate Americans. The more unbearable the suffering, the better the sales; the more sordid or horrific the experience, the greater the potential for commercial success. (Milani 2013: 140)[2]

This is particularly true of those memoirs which purport to give an account of the suffering (and sometimes redemption) of the subject in Muslim lands, labouring beneath injustice, tyranny, and religious oppres-

sion. As several critics have noted, such memoirs became increasingly popular in the years after 9/11, in tandem with the aggressive pursuit of American strategic interests in these regions. One of the ways in which suffering is embedded in Eteraz's memoir is through its link to Pakistan as a place of misery and misfortune.[3] We get a sense of this throughout the memoir and particularly after the family moves to the United States. For instance, when the parents are confronted by disobedience from their offspring in Alabama, they perceive this as a result of American influence and threaten the children with the punishment of being sent back home to Pakistan. In the process, they teach their children to perceive the West as a hedonistic place that is not to be trusted and Pakistan as a place where their fate will be determined by the family.

In contrast to the gloomy alienation suggested by the text's peritexts, Eteraz's biographical details on the dust jacket indicate that he is networked into American society as a successful high-achieving cosmopolitan Pakistani author who travels across the world, is a graduate from elite institutions, and comes with a notable publishing profile. We learn that he is:

> [a] graduate of Emory University and Temple Law School, he was selected for the Outstanding Scholar's Program at the United States Department of Justice and later worked in corporate litigation in Manhattan. He is a regular contributor to *True/Slant*; has published articles about Islam and Pakistan politics in *Dissent*, *Foreign Policy*, AlterNet and altMuslim; and is a regular contributor to *The Guardian* UK and *Dawn*… He currently divides his time between Princeton, New Jersey, and the Middle East. (Eteraz 2009: cover blurb)

This self-presentation is significantly altered in the book as there is no direct reference to either Emory University or Temple Law School in the story. Instead, Eteraz's self-construction in the memoir lies closer to the more conventionally expected profile of the Muslim male immigrant to the West who is emotionally and materially deprived, and whose Islamic cultural inheritance therefore almost pre-programmes him to turn out a particular way. Indeed, the conventional outline of the narrative may be what has ensured its positive reception in the United States: Eteraz

appears to confirm the pre-existing framing of the Muslim subject as susceptible to radicalisation and filled with antipathy to the West, but here with the added bonus that this particular subject describes a course that leads him back into the fold of reasonable subjects. In the end, after all his travails, the Eteraz shown in *Children of Dust* turns out to be one of us after all—a development confirmed by his appearance on the US book circuit, critical plaudits, and the reward of a follow-up book contract.

The expectation from Eteraz as an author is best articulated in the interview on NPR radio with Terry Gross whose comments focus on the appeal of American individualism embedded in the memoir that clashes with the austere, collectivist Islamic narrative. She says:

> your story strikes me as the story of a lot of American kids and teenagers, in that so many Americans struggle with their identity and they try on several different personalities when they become teenagers … until they finally figure out who they really are. It seems to me you did that, but every step of the way it was about your relationship to Islam. (NPR 2009)[4]

Here we see a double move where the impulse to universalise the experience in the book is immediately foreclosed by the determinant frame of being a Muslim. Eteraz explains the motivation that guided him; 'I felt like I was protesting not just against the kind of character-making, you know, Islam bashing non-Muslims but also … the violent fanatic extremists from the Muslim side' (2009). Eteraz chooses to do this by effectively inhabiting the available Muslim positions within that frame, one by one, as if trying them on for size. I would suggest that it is this compendious quality—displaying to us an array of 'Muslim types'—that has contributed most to the text's positive reception among Western publishers and readers.

The urge to present an 'authentic' voice is evident in the text itself from the outset. In the prologue, the narrator/author tells us:

> To say that I was enamoured of Islam would be an understatement. I waved the banners of this faith from Asia to America. I studied Islamic scripture and scholarship from an early age. I aspired, perspired and prayed one day

> to be lucky enough to rise to the apex of my religion. Over and over again I strove to be an Islamic activist – to become the embodiment of Muhammad's religion. (Eteraz 2009: xi)

At this point, it seems clear that we are, at last, to be given a direct insight into the radicalised mind. This is elaborated through a chronological narrative spread across five books outlining the journey from mental and physical oppression to spiritual enlightenment. In Book I, the narrator gives us a detailed account of his beginnings in Pakistan in a pious and impoverished household. Here he faces the rigours of *madrassa* life and general unhappiness caused by a lack of material wealth. The family's financial misfortune in Pakistan is alleviated by their move to America in Book II. As Muslim migrants, Eteraz's parents are shown to be highly conservative in their attitudes to the West, and under their influence, Eteraz re-styles himself in the guise of the Islamist 'Abu Bakar Ramaq': one of several name changes he undergoes, corresponding to his shifting understanding of Islam. *Children of Dust*'s determination to cover all possible identity options presented to the Muslim in the contemporary Western gaze is confirmed when, after temporarily falling under the influence of secular postmodernist thinkers, 9/11 jolts the narrator into remaking himself as an Islamic reformer. In the fifth and final book, his tortured Muslim soul can only be saved by taking the path of Sufi quietism and migration to the Middle East. However, even that is not enough as he adds one final twist to the tale with his return to America and retreat to a diasporic nostalgia embodied in his relationship with his mother. All these twists and turns give the book a somewhat hectic, disorganised feel, added to by the comedic under-cutting. What the reader is left with is a baggy monster of a book from which Eteraz emerges as an impressionable but trustworthy native informant who delivers a memoir that appears to confirm American society's worst suspicions about its Muslim immigrant subjects.

Eteraz's deployment of irony—at times gentle and at times caustic—serves to position us as readers in relation to the different personae he adopts. This is memorably the case where he satirises supposed Muslim homophobia and the limits of sexual freedom. For instance, when he is

in his fundamentalist phase as Abu Bakar Ramaq, the narrator finds himself analysing his responses to his friend Moosa Farid's homophobic utterances. Moosa is introduced to us with his diatribe on homosexuality: '"Man, I walked in on that white boy sodomizing another one… The room smelled like wet towels. Gross stuff. It was like I was back in the Prophet Lut's time. We know how God punished *them*"' (2009: 150). The narrator summarises Moosa as someone who thought 'the gays' in Manhattan were after him and that '[a]ll these homosexuals were surely sent as a sign to remind Moosa Farid how much of a Muslim he was; how unlike Manhattan he was. And the more Moosa talked about homosexuals, the more Muslim I felt too' (2009: 150). The pronounced fundamentalism of Moosa's claims articulated in excessive fashion is designed to reiterate the disorientation that comes from normative religious morality. By emphasising Moosa's opinions, the narrator shifts attention away from his own sexual confusion to the heteronormative views of his friend. This technique of familiarity and alienation offers a way of challenging the narrative of authenticity and 'truth-telling' promised by the memoir. Gayatri Gopinath in her study of queer diaspora elaborates on how heterosexuality and queerness can be used as foils to explode the 'binary opposition' between 'heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy' (Gopinath 2005: 11). In the book, the exaggerated heteronormativity of Moosa can be read as a strategy to underscore the East/West, *halall/haram* dyad through which the narrator at this point constructs his world.

Eteraz shows how the idea of being authentic is not intrinsic to the individual but part of a larger story of becoming, impacted on by family, heritage, and nation. In the narrative, there is a turning point from the story of familial control to individual resistance as the narrator takes charge of his narrative through the symbolic act of renaming. He begins the book with the name given to him by his parents, Abir ul Islam, which metamorphoses into self-chosen names reflecting the stages that he is going through. The most notable of these are the fundamentalist Abu Bakar Ramaq and the noble protestor Ali Eteraz. (In my analysis, I will therefore refer to the narrator as a generic term of reference given that the book is marked by a variety of personae.) Not long after his arrival in America, Abir ul Islam changes his name to the American Amir. When he

announces this to his parents, he tells them that Abir ul Islam is a horrible name. 'A *beer* ul Islam' is how Americans pronounce it and make fun of it he tells us. 'I've been called every major alcoholic beverage, there is [Bud, Budweiser, Bud Light]. Even fictional ones. … I know the names of as many beers as there are names of Allah' (2009: 141). The comedic mixing of the *halal* (Abir) with the *haram* (alcohol) is indicative of Eteraz's satirical style and contrasts with the mock seriousness of the different personae he appropriates. Later when he goes to university and becomes a born-again Muslim, he decides to call himself Abu Bakr Ramaq signifying his ancestral link to the Abbasid Caliphate. 'The name Ramaq, which meant "spark of light," represented the passion I felt for Islam' (2009: 163).

As Abu Bakr Ramaq, he engenders trustworthiness in his persona by conveying his knowledge about Islam. He plays at being the perfect Muslim by tracing family ancestry to the Caliphate, growing a beard, uttering *alhamdulillah* and *subhanallah* in almost every sentence and converting non-Muslims (2009: 164). Donning the guise of the missionary, he sets about disproving the work of two false prophets of Islam in the west: Osama bin Laden who he considers to be an impostor and Salman Rushdie who he labels a secularist troublemaker. Notably, this is before 9/11. He discounts bin Laden's persona as a scholar and writes him off because he has no interest in the afterlife. He thinks Salman Rushdie is a 'false prophet' because he 'was out to undermine every Muslim's faith, it seemed to me' (2009: 171). To ensure that his rejection of Rushdie is real, he is at pains to tell the reader that he has read *The Satanic Verses* in order to challenge it. This deliberate act of reading the book satirises those British and worldwide protestors who never read the book they selected to burn. In an attempt to write-off that type of protestor, he contrasts his close reading of Rushdie's offensive book with a lecture that he attended in England by the African American Imam, Zaid Shakir, on 'The Changing Face of Secularism and Islamic Response'.[5] Through juxtaposing an evangelical Muslim convert Shakir with a liberal Muslim-born Rushdie, he sets up an absurd comparison. Showing himself to be a moderate mediator, he chooses to shelve Rushdie's book in the Art History section of the library as an 'act of protest' so that 'weaker' Muslims would not be influenced by it. In doing so, he evokes humour

because 'Muslims – who considered images haram – didn't usually study art history. Hiding the book was way better than burning it – which drew attention to it' (2009: 173). Removing violence from the radical persona of Ramaq, Eteraz replaces it with the aura of laughter. This joking voice disturbs the reader's perception of a fundamentalist and highlights the 'close link between laughter and moral judgement' (Billig 2005: 159).[6] The 'angry Muslim' is thereby undercut and revealed as just another stereotype to be inhabited by Eteraz's protagonist. According to the philosopher and scholar Annette Baier, terrorists are typically 'angry or resentful about something, but it is very easy to deceive oneself about what it is that angers one' (Baier 1994: 204). The Ramaq persona is brought to a sudden end after an unsuccessful trip to Pakistan to find a suitable wife. From there, the book jumps to the persona of Amir ul Islam who embraces modernity and anti-Islamic values. This avatar is short lived, coming to a sudden end when the attacks on the Twin Towers occur.

Incorporating the global North's perennial perception of Muslims as a problem, the book tries to both translate and critique Muslim life. Given his primary American audience, Eteraz includes a reference to 9/11 as a turning point for the narrator in his approach to Islam. He also refers to global events such as the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, where Muslims worldwide protested the publication of insulting cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, to convey his position on the need for an Islamic reformation. While referring to the event as a 'fiasco', the narrator describes it as a key trigger that awakened a calling to Islam. Objecting to the violence that came out in some of the protests against the cartoon controversy, he chooses to offer his own earnest position. Now in his fifth and final guise, the voice of the noble protestor Ali Eteraz tells us that: 'It required being a renegade willing to protest, to wage a life-affirming counter-jihad against the nihilism of jihadists, to toss away magazines of bullets and replace them with magazines containing bullet-points of knowledge' (Eteraz 2009: 279).

The adoption of religion as an authentic mode of existence in reaction against the West is something that is common to the anti-Western

revivalist rhetoric employed by groups such as the Taliban and Daesh/ISIS: the latter seeking to reinvent the Islamic Caliphate as an alternative model for Muslims.[7] Yet, this type of revivalism still very much articulates itself through the good Muslim/bad Muslim paradigm also beloved of Islamophobes in the West, simply reversing the evaluation, so that fundamentalists become 'good' and liberal secular Muslims 'bad'. Eteraz's work subtly challenges totalising interpretations of authentic and inauthentic Islam. The strain of trying to maintain the dividing line is central to Eteraz's comedic representation.

Writing of the potentially destabilising effects of comedy in his book, *After Empire*, Paul Gilroy recalls the phenomenal popularity of Sacha Baron Cohen's comic creation Ali G in the early years of the twenty-first century. For Gilroy, Ali G's humour teases out the anxieties that circulate around minority identity to comic effect. Gilroy claims that Ali G's random assemblage of youth cultural styles—in both dress and vernacular speech—which mixes and confuses black and Asian styles and idioms, results in 'undecideability'. This leads to a kind of cultural estrangement that has the effect of 'alienating' its audience, in the Brechtian sense:

> It is not far fetched to suggest that the huge amounts of energy that were wasted worrying about whether the Ali G character was a white Jew pretending to be a back, a white Jew pretending to be a white pretending to be a black, a white Jew pretending to be an Asian pretending to be black, and so on might have been better spent positioning his tactics in a proper historical and artistic sequence of strangers whose strangeness was functional and educative. (Gilroy 2004: 79)

His assessment is that Ali G's mixing of styles and hybrid identities and his self-representation 'as a stranger in his own country', helps to disrupt a 'postcolonial melancholia' which imagines Englishness in nostalgic white hegemonic terms (2004: 149).

While it is, perhaps, harder to identify such claiming estrangement as a deliberate tactic in the somewhat hectic narrative quick changes of *Children of Dust*, we can nonetheless argue that as a diasporic

subject in America, the impact of Eteraz's stagings are similar to those of Ali G through the use of laughter to disrupt the latent threat posed by his ethnic identity as a Pakistani and a Muslim in age of the War on Terror. In the mixed audience response that he gets, it is clear to see that there are different interpretations of his memoir. For instance, an American blogger 'Teal Warrior', reads the book as an anthropological insight into a Muslim community that she wishes to have more knowledge about after 9/11.[8] In her reading, Eteraz offers a reliable cultural translation of 'religious zeal'. There is no reference to the comic in this strait-laced perspective. Such responses are more indicative of a certain kind of liberal Western wish-fulfilment—the desire to have the speaking Muslim subject confirm for us the rightness of our own prurient anthropological interest in 'the Muslim' as an ultimate Other. On the other hand, another American reader and academic, David Waterman, reviewing the book for the journal *Pakistaniaat*, appears to recognise an implicit invitation to the reader to recognise his or her cultural prejudices, describing the story as 'long and heart-rending, sometimes funny, sometimes frustrating', and suggesting that Eteraz's willingness to share it 'makes us all better off in the telling and re-telling as we reflect on our own covenants and baggage' (Waterman 2010: 50).[9] In short, this writing has the potential to unlock the dialectic of authentic/inauthentic, West/non-West, in the process making visible what Mufti calls, the 'identification of selves as insiders and outsiders, nationals and aliens' at one and the same time (Mufti 2000: 101).

The fact that Eteraz rehearses and discards a series of positions that are *intrinsic* to Islamic cultures—donning and doffing identities and ideological standpoints as if they were mere costumes—suggests that the quest for authenticity may be a wild goose chase. Eteraz's diasporic journey and the many religious identities he appropriates in Pakistan and in the United States, translate the impossibility of locating a true essence of Islam, echoing a discomfort with available national and religious projects.[10]

The resulting question of whether we can 'trust' this narrator to give us the actual experience of Islamic radicalisation, is a corollary for those

questions of trust that are raised in the text itself. Owing to the conservative nature of his parents, Eteraz's protagonist is exposed to a constant mistrust of the West. The first generation of Muslim migrants are here depicted as resistant to American individualism in particular. The parents exercise a tight control over the morality of their sons. In the United States, as the family network shrinks, the parents turn to religious community membership in an effort to belong and to provide alternative role models for their children to make up for the absence of an extended family: 'Pops's preferred means of regulation was to keep me busy with the Tablighi Jamaat, the merry band of missionaries from Pakistan who sent sorties to the West to make certain that Muslims in America didn't give in to hedonism' (Eteraz 2009: 120). In Alabama, the family's orthodox Sunni beliefs turn to a hardline Salafi Islam so that they can fit in with a community tenaciously clinging onto an ossified notion of Islamic orthodoxy, despite some reservations over the strict interpretation of what is permissible in Islam. In highlighting evangelical Islamic group membership as part of his migrant Muslim experience, Eteraz illustrates the 'within group' model of associational trust, mentioned by Earle and Cvetkovitch, followed by his parents, that fosters a mistrust of others who don't observe the same rituals.

Another place where mistrust is articulated is in gender and interpersonal relationships. Eteraz, cursed by his internalised sense of mission as the harbinger of Islam, is unable to sustain personal relationships. His relationship with girls is generally doomed because he projects the impression of a sex-starved Pakistani male stereotype. He eventually finds solace in spiritual awakening and male friendship. This is exemplified in the last part of the novel which charts his relationship with his friend Ziad and his migration to the Middle East as the place most in need of Islamic reform. Their homosocial friendship is depicted as a symbolic echo of the historic relationship between the thirteenth-century mystic Jalaluddin Rumi and his poet companion Shams of Tabriz, with the narrator in the role of Rumi and his friend as Shams.[11] The friends bond over the poetry of the seventeenth-century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah as shared cultural common ground, but their reception of his message is markedly different. The poetry of Bulleh Shah is a significant point of reference as it provides an important intertextual link referring to the poet's rejection

of religious orthodoxy in his time cutting across class, caste, and religious hierarchies to convey a sufi message of devotionalism.[12] By including Bulleh Shah's verse, the narrator is pointing to a tradition of Sufi syncretism that he feels is lost because of the lack of patronage given to the vernacular heritage of Punjabi. Caught between the popularity of Rumi for an American audience and the authenticity of his Punjabi ethnicity, the narrator tries to translate what he thinks is the 'reformist' message of Bulleh Shah's poetry for his friend. However, Ziad feels that the narrator is a literalist in the way he reads Bulleh Shah's work and as his friend and companion he feels it is his duty to make him aware of this. He accuses the narrator of misunderstanding Bulleh Shah and being an idolater because:

> You, my friend, place the Second Witness over and above the First. That's wrong. It's wrong because the real covenant that guides your life, the one that you should be obsessed with, is in the service of all humanity. It's for the 'We'. It's for God. … You associate partners with God. Islam is your idol.' (2009: 333)

The narrator has to learn from Ziad that 'he isn't a "noble" or a "shaykh"'. He is told: '[o]n top of that you're a Pakistani-born American. To many Arabs that makes you dirty *and* an imperialist. This is what you are in their eyes …. This is the rebuke you'll run into the moment you go into a *madrassa* or a mosque and try to get some support around here' (2009: 283–4). For Ziad, the narrator is the one who is most in need of reform. His persona is shown to be completely individualistic without any ability to laugh at himself: a personification of the Muslim middle classes who are the 'mall-going, bureaucratic, Camry-driving portion of the population – which is uptight and stuck-up' (2009: 298).

Ziad's ridiculing of the narrator shifts the humour from laughter aimed at the migrant's incongruous adaptations to multicultural life to a darker mode of satire in which he himself becomes the butt of the joke. Michael Billig has observed that it is 'easy to praise humour for bringing people together in moments of pure, creative enjoyment. But it is not those sorts of moments that constitute the social core of humour, but, instead, it is the darker, less admired practice of ridicule' (Billig 2005: 2). Billig argues

that 'ridicule provides a key force in maintaining a social order' and that laughter is a 'rhetorical' rather than a 'natural' reaction (199). In the face of ridicule, Eteraz abandons his grandiose plans of reform and his covenant to Islam, opting instead to return to his family. Billig's reading of laughter as a rhetorical act here echoes Gilroy's observations. When applied to the comedic tone of parts of the book, it reiterates that the memoirist may not be a disruptive force to the social order that he finds himself in. Instead his comedy is an act of fitting in: part of a desperate attempt at making himself a trustworthy multicultural subject.

The narrator's uneasy relationship to Sufi devotionalism also has to be resolved so that the reader can fully trust Eteraz's redemption. Predictably, he finds this in a community celebration amongst the Pakistani labouring class in the Middle East. Initially uneasy about sharing space with fellow Pakistanis, he finds himself feeling at home because his host Arif shares his values about Islamic moderation condemning suicide bombers who give Muslims a bad name. During the gathering, the ritual of a devotional song *hamd* in a mixture of ethnic languages from Pakistan, 'melted away my skin and sinew and made me a part of the men around me. These men who were raised from dust, lived in dust, and would eventually rest in dust. I felt one with them. I was *not* alone. We were many. We were all children of dust' (2009: 324). Here, in a ground clearing gesture aimed as a response to his friend Ziad's critique, Eteraz tries to shift the grand Sufi narrative of a Rumi and Shams of Tabriz by immersing himself in a Pakistani working-class experience of devotional music connecting and authenticating the syncretic South Asian spirit of Bulleh Shah's poetry.

As the book gravitates towards the softer Sufi side of Islam, we see the comedy give way to a nostalgic yearning. The memoir ends abruptly with the narrator's return to the fold of family. In particular, he goes back to live with his mother, in part recreating the domestic set-up of his childhood. Instead of Lahore, the location this time is California. He finds solace in his mother's simple piety enacted on her prayer mat where she 'performs two *rakats*, two cycles of prayer' (2009: 336). Significantly, her prayers take place after listening to Punjabi love songs on YouTube that are about the pain of separation from the beloved. Juxtaposing music and prayer, Eteraz challenges the limits of permissibility in certain strains of Islam, where music is censured. In his apparent regression, Ali becomes

Abir again as he asks his mother to tell him the same story she used to when he was a child and his mother responds with the lines: 'My little Abir. You grew up all these years, […] Just to become innocent again' (2009: 337). In the room with his mother, he seems to have left all the social hierarchies behind that have caused him his insecurities and withdrawn to the womb. At this moment, his mission to translate Muslim life seems to have deserted him completely. The experience of social distrust in a multicultural society as a Muslim American and in particular a third world Pakistani Muslim American has returned him to the only comfort he trusts, of family.

Eteraz on one level rejects the cultural traditions and values initially upheld by his family. He discovers their values to be fixed, offering very little room for manoeuvre. However, his own subsequent journey, as described in the memoir, is coloured by the difficulties of placing trust (and being trusted and trustworthy). His story remains poised between offering a social critique of Islam and a reiteration of the dominant perception of Muslims as a problem in society. The narrator's final state is one of seemingly permanent nostalgia, unable to reconcile the comforts of the past with the challenges of the present. The book's driving quest—Abir ul Islam's covenant to propagate Islam—illustrates how the obsession with being authentic can lead to an identity crisis for Muslims in the West, and can drive a wedge between the competing demands of tradition and modernity. In conclusion, we might suggest that Eteraz himself, as a writer, has not wholly escaped this trap, since to rehearse supposedly 'authentic' positions—even if ultimately to repudiate them—is to recapitulate the 'already known': the procession of pre-scripted Muslim identities, from Salafi to Sufi, which pass before the Western reader like a familiar parade. In short, what makes the book flawed is its attempt to cover all possible angles. The desire to fulfil the expectations required of a Muslim writer causes the book to vacillate between humour and earnestness. As his reception in the United States shows, Eteraz has proved that he is able to respond to the demands of American individualism, but in the process he has had to forego an association with the community. His narrator-protagonist retreats to the folds of family, just as Eteraz himself adopts the expected role of native informant. The comfort felt by the narrator's retreat into the known and familiar may well be echoed by the

(Western) reader's relieved recognition of the Muslim types played out before our eyes. Comedy may introduce uncertainty into this exchange at times, but ultimately Eteraz's memoir confirms a limited frame of options for the Muslim in America (and perhaps the Muslim American) which chime disturbingly with the some of the more reductive stereotypes about non-integrated minorities and an 'enemy within'.

Notes

1. On *biraderi* networks amongst the Pakistani community in the UK, see Alison Shaw, *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2000. Parveen Akhtar, *British Muslim Politics: Examining Pakistani Biraderi Networks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Pnina Werbner, *The Migration Process: Capital, Gifts and Offerings Among British Pakistanis*. Berg, 1990.
2. This view is also present in Linda Anderson's assessment of the increased reading interest in memoirs since the 1990s. She notes the shared link between reality TV and memoirs and extends our understanding of this phenomenon as merely voyeuristic, marking it instead as a 'need to form "ad hoc communities", to find provisional settings which can both extend and confirm the meaning of the individual and the personal' amongst viewing publics (Anderson 2001: 114). On the Muslim memoir also see Anshuman Mondal's 'Bad Faith: The Construction of Muslim Extremism in Ed Husain's *The Islamist*'. In *Culture, Diaspora and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, ed. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin. Abingdon/New York: Routledge. 2012, 37–51.
3. Such texts often foreground female experience, thereby underlining the association of Islam with patriarchal oppression. The trajectory of these stories features escape or (more often) rescue by the forces of Western enlightenment. Focussing on the derivative nature of their favoured style and imagery, Roksana Bahramitash has labelled such texts as instances of 'Orientalist Feminism'. See Roksana Bahramitash, 'The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14:2 (2005), 221. See also Dora Ahmad, 'Not Yet Beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American Popular Literature', *Social Text*, 99:27:2 (2009), 109–111.

4. Terry Gross interview with Ali Eteraz, NPR 'Fresh Air'. October 29, 2009. Referenced as 2009a in text. http://www.npr.org/books/authors/138132877/ali-eteraz. Accessed June 16, 2017.
5. Imam Zaid Shakir is a co-founder of Zaytuna College in Berkeley California. His biography can be accessed on https://www.newislamicdirections.com/about/. Eteraz seems to be referring to a lecture that he gave at Aylesbury mosque, UK on 'The changing face of secularism and the Islamic response' in February 1999. The text is available on http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/sec.htm Accessed June 20, 2017. On social media, Zaid has 67.2k followers on Instagram and 137k followers on twitter.
6. According to Freud, 'jokes act as displacement activities permitting subterranean (sexual, hostile) desires—bypass ethical and social constraints'. See Sigmund Freud. *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. Joyce Crick. London: Penguin Classics. [1905] 2002.
7. Historically, this is true of anti-colonial movements as well. An engaging context of Muslim anti-colonial resistance is provided by Ayesha Jalal in her book, *Partisans of Allah*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008. For a recent study that explodes the myth of the 'war of civilisations' between Islam and the west see Mahmood Mamdani's, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and Roots of Terror*. USA: Three Leaves Press, 2004.
8. Review of Eteraz's book by blogger 'Teal Warrior' aka Dixie Theriault https://dixie-afewofmyfavoritethings.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/ Accessed 01/07/2017. For a real life anthropological study of Arab Muslim American lives in Brooklyn and how they negotiate multiple identities in a time of cultural misunderstandings see Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does it Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*. New York: Penguin Press. 2008.
9. See all reviews listed on the author's website. http://alieteraz.com/childrenofdust (Accessed June 19, 2017).
10. My understanding of diaspora is influenced by seminal publications from Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. James Clifford 'Diasporas' in *Cultural Anthropology*, 1994. 9:3, pp. 302–338, and Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds, *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press 1994.

11. The critic Elena Furlanetto talks about the 'Rumi phenomenon' in the American literary market since 1994 with reference to the critically acclaimed Turkish novelist Elif Shafak's 2010 novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*. Furlanetto argues that the cultural translation of Rumi for a Western audience flattens local nuances and carries traces of Orientalism. The Rumi phenomenon was sparked by the best-selling translation by Coleman Barks's 1995, *The Essential Rumi* (Elena Furlanetto, 'The "Rumi Phenomenon" Between Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism: the case of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*', 2013, 17: 2, 201–13).
12. See Christopher Shackle's reading of Bulleh Shah's devotional Sufi poetry in his 'Sacred Love, lyrical death', *Critical Muslim*. 2013: 5, pp. 31–48.

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