

Listening to Adonis
de **Nadeem Aslam**

One night some years before I was born, my mother balanced a ladder on two thick branches within the canopy of a tall tree and climbed upwards, emerging out of the leaves and flowers, her arms free and outstretched as she arrived at the topmost rung.

The tree was a jacaranda, *neelum* in Urdu, its high flowers a delicate blue-violet, as though the floor of an English bluebell wood had been made airborne. It stood behind my grandparents' house in Pakistan, and I have seen it, have imagined the young woman rising above the blue haze of its flowers. Just beyond the farthest rung, her mother was leaning out of a window and she pulled her young daughter into the house safely, the ladder falling away.

That evening my mother had attended a performance of devotional Muslim music at a house in the next street. Her brother, my uncle, had become the follower of a strict unsmiling sect of Islam that forbade such gatherings, and upon discovering where his sister was, he had installed himself at the front door of my grandparents' house to wait for her return, a cane in his hand.

On the very first page of my first novel, I wrote about an adult who takes children's toys from them and hands them back broken. Islam forbids idolatry, and toys can be considered idols, are to be smashed. My uncle had done that to me, snatched from my hands a mask that I had just bought from a vendor in the street and torn it to bits. I can still feel the child's shock and incomprehension. It was the same sect that the Taliban regime would follow three decades later. It would be state policy in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to ban children's toys, as well as devotional music.

In Turin, Italy, in the spring of 2005, I went to a reading given by the Syrian poet Adonis. He would read a few verses in Arabic and then pause while they were translated into Italian for the audience. I know neither language and yet, not long into the reading, I discovered that my eyes were full of tears, realised that if I did not exert control I would be weeping openly. I was puzzled and when later I told my friends about it there was amusement. It takes me a long time before experience can become words, become comprehension, and I think I know now, these months later, why I had almost cried on hearing the verses of Adonis.

It begins with the sound of the Arabic language, and how that sound had inspired fear and anxiety in me since my earliest days.

I was made to read the Koran as a child without any understanding of the grammar or idiom of Arabic. I was supposed to commit the words to heart simply because they were sacred. My mind even then did not work like that, and I was regularly slapped or beaten with a cane on the hands and body by the clerics for not having memorised the verses. Even more frightening than the thought of being punished myself, was the thought that my brother – who, if I am remembering accurately, was the first human being I loved – would be beaten. I carry in my mind the sight of him crying out under the blows one day at the mosque. Then there was that uncle, who was feared by everyone, including my mother, and whose loud chanting of the Koran in Arabic would wake me at dawn. As a result of such associations, the very sound of that language came to sicken me.

I cannot be certain but perhaps there is more – another layer. As I left childhood behind and entered my teenage years, Pakistan was changing due to the military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, who legitimised his regime by promoting what he called Islamic values. Koran in Arabic came to be chanted on television and radio at every opportunity and people soon began to give their children strange-sounding Arabic names – and these 'Islamic values' also meant public hanging and floggings of criminals, as occurs in Saudi Arabia. This was new to Pakistan's everyday life, and I found it truly horrific, this brutalisation of my country's civil life.

I loved – and continue to love - the pages of certain copies of the Koran, the lovingly illuminated borders, the geometric designs on the title pages. A small chrysanthemum flower employed at the end of each verse instead of a full stop! One of my oldest notebooks has the following sentence: *Allah will surely prove his love for his creatures by filling Paradise not only with wine and beautiful girls and boys, as promised, but with arabesques as well.* The sinuous calligraphy of Arabic was greatly pleasing to my eyes but I stopped myself from pronouncing the words. I sound-proofed my eyes.

I left Pakistan in my mid-teens. Here in England, I had no real contact with spoken Arabic – any more than I had contact with spoken Chinese or Greek - until I began to hear the taped interviews and pronouncements of Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists; and they too were full of finger-wagging hatred and the firestorms of Hell.

I had not lived a very cosmopolitan life. My parents to this day do not know any country other than England and Pakistan, with a few memories of India

where they were both born before the Partition. The opportunity to travel had come to me only with becoming a published writer. And so that day in Italy - during one of my very first trips abroad - when the great Adonis read aloud the poems I had known in English translation for many years, it was a struggle for me to reconcile the hated sound with the loved words that were echoing in my head. *Her name was walking silently through the forest of letters.*

My life is books. My study is an untaken city. I had read widely in Arabic literature, beginning, yes, with the *Thousand Nights and a Night*. I had even read the Koran several times as an adult, and of course there were the novels of the magnificent Naguib Mahfouz. The pre-Islamic pagan poetry. The fables of *Kalila wa-Dimna*. Extracts from a sorcerer's manual from eleventh-century Spain. The wounded and wounding lines of Mahmoud Darwish. But all this was in English translation, read in utter silence in my study. The aural connection had been severed long ago. Until that day sitting in front of Adonis. And then there was confusion because how could a sound that spoke to me of brutality, that invoked in me terror and dread, be juxtaposed onto words of love, of kindness, of longing? There lay the source of my tears. *Qays used to say I have clothed my body with Leila and clothed the human race.*

Certain men had done that to me: they did not let me hear love being spoken in Arabic. They are out there in the world, these men. The sect my uncle belonged to is proposing to erect a giant mosque next to the Olympics stadium in London's East End.

But of course if I can change, the other side can too. One day I saw my uncle become fascinated by the small intricate bird I had folded out of red paper and left lying around. After a few moments he seemed to remember himself and closed his fist around the shape, crumpling and tossing it aside. But I know that, just for that short fraction of time, he had encountered wonder and the possibility of beauty within something he loathed, something he went on to destroy.

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