

## At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament

THIS is a work of literary criticism; Sadia Abbas selects works of art, literature, film and other media and popular culture emanating principally from Europe and the US, and South Asia and the Middle East. She presents these texts and images as the most intricate and complex evidence of 'a new "Islam"' (p. 1). According to her account this new form of Islam began around 1988 with the condemnation of Salman Rushdie ('the Rushdie affair', p. 1) and the end of the Cold War the following year.

The author posits freedom as central to this instantiation of Islam. However, it is a 'freedom' that is only such for lack of another word. The freedom it holds out is one defined by contrast with a kind of mandatory freedom—a kind of freedom both sanctioned and promoted by authorities and governments of Western countries, chiefly although not exclusively by the US and the UK. This dominant assigned form of freedom is a species of freedom that possesses a monopoly on the word 'freedom' but does not, according to the new form of Islam, grasp or capture the true sense of it. The artists and writers whose works Abbas explores and interprets seek to simultaneously resist the assignment, and salvage or appropriate (and whilst appropriating re-shape) the meaning of freedom.

The variety of approaches and expressions the book describes and re-visits are post-colonial—or perhaps more accurately (but less succinctly) aspirationally post post-colonial. They seek sometimes inchoately to transcend felt post-colonial realities. The Muslim characters in or authoring these creative works are in a predicament: they find themselves in the paradoxical position of being neither free to be free, nor free

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At Freedom's Limit:  
Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament

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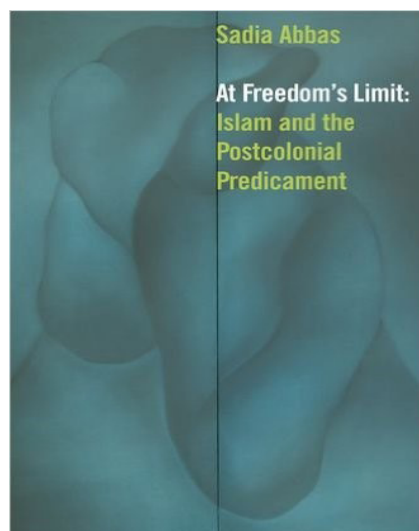
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The most lucid articulation of this impulse is a statement made in connection with veiling and a suicide (in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*) and the way in which Abbas suggests that the Muslim woman is 'increasingly, the discursive

site on which the central preoccupation of our time—how do you free yourself from freedom?—is worked out’ (p. 48). Whilst she is not here ratifying this portrayal or figurative representation of Muslim women (which as she suggests adds one new element to the sequence of discursive roles with which they have been encumbered), when she encounters seemingly unwelcome and unexpected complexities in condemning ‘honour killings’ (pp. 48 and 197) the paradox crystallizes. The obvious, and in her estimation superficially attractive, option—the condemnation of such killings on liberal grounds (the invocation of a variety of freedoms and rights) appears to be beyond the pale, or so she feels. At the same time the author is uncomfortable resorting to Islamic legal doctrine against such killing even when it would provide the sought-for rulings—for the reason that Islamic law also poses a potential hegemony that ought to be resisted and interrogated before admission into the jurisdiction so to speak of the new Islam.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book explore the theme of freedom as emerging in this new Islam by offering interpretations of current popular culture—including television (Spooks, or MI-5) and movies (Hurt Locker, Zero Dark Thirty). In ch. 2 ‘The Echo Chamber of Freedom’ an allusion to Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* brings the liberal or anti-liberal dilemma into relief: the order to be an individual followed by a lone dissenter who is quickly silenced (p. 41). Abbas writes: ‘Who gets to be an individual in the age of individualism? Is emancipation a ne-

cessity, and if so, how can one choose it? Indeed, how does one free oneself from freedom?’ (p. 43) The bind that Abbas presents and ascribes to Muslims forces a choice—whether falsely or not the reader had best decide.

The third chapter presents Leila Aboulela’s novels interpreted as advocating the interpretive programme Abbas has formulated—the identification and elaboration of this new Islam. The fourth poses the question of whether a religious novel is possible, occasioning an examination of the history of the novel and Protestant social reforms’ privileging of female virtue and piety; together with how a religious novel might approach blasphemy. The final two chapters take up the paintings of Komail Aijazuddin, and the literary works of a pair of novelists (Mohammed Hanif and Nadeem Aslam) writing in English but drawing upon Urdu literary sources including Saadat Hasan Manto and Qurraulain Hyder. Abbas assembles these sources under the category of Cold War Baroque, which, she writes, is a poetic and ironic ‘set of aesthetic imaginings of icons and iconographies poised against the cultivation of iconoclastic and (sometimes iconically) antiaesthetic branches of Islam by the US and Saudi governments and third world nationalist and praetorian regimes’ (pp. 6–7).

In addition to imaginatively and critically engaging with literary works, passing beyond the frontier of liberal freedom and individualism into whatever may (or may not) lie beyond appears to be a key motivation behind the writing of this book. As well as a key to understanding it. However it

is not apparent why any one group of people (here Muslim people, or Muslim women, or more broadly post-colonial subjects—however the boundaries may be drawn is immaterial) is uniquely prone to doubts and frustrations about liberal certitudes or about their position and status in national and global hierarchies. No racial or religious, national or social identification—nor being free of all of these identities, were that a genuine possibility—actually releases a person (whether they consider themselves first an individual and second a member of a group, or vice versa) from these questions and the anomie that ensues upon asking them. Indeed one need look no further than the well-worn liberal and communitarian debate peaking in political theory in the 1990s to find ample evidence of this, as it is a problem of modernity—whether that is a modernity with or without, or before or after, colonialism.

Finally is there anything at all distinctive, or distinctively Islamic, about this new Islam, or about the new world inhabited by those Muslims caught in an echo chamber of freedom and liberalism as Abbas perceives and vividly represents them? Whether the book’s central antinomy is reached by way of aesthetic and literary taste and imagination, or by logical argumentation and reasoning, many a reader might feel that the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tensions enacted in this book are a cause not for angst but for a knitting together of people (or should the people so prefer) of peoples.

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