

**Readings & Conversations**  
**Tariq Ali**  
**with**  
**Micheline Aharonian Marcom**  
**19 November 2003**

**Conversation**

**Micheline Marcom:** So, that was wonderful. It is always wonderful to hear you speak. There is so much information out there and you have.....the way that you are able to bring it all together in a way that one can understand it is just really valuable. [Applause] And when you speak, it seems...you're very plain spoken and it's that kind of plain speaking and speaking the truth that is just so important at this point in the United States and elsewhere. What I wanted to ask you to start with, is your political writing is very engaged and it's not detached; it's not the detached style one finds sometime in these political books. It's passionate, it's humorous, it's occasionally ribald. You often blur the boundaries in fact between literature and historical analysis. In fact, tonight you read us a few of the poems which are in both *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* and *Bush in Babylon*, the Arab poets. I wonder if you can talk about that a little bit, if that's deliberate on your part.

**Tariq Ali:** Well, I think the way you write nonfiction depends on who you are and where you are. Mercifully, I've never been attached to any academic institution. [Laughter] So I don't have to write to impress other academics, or write in a jargon which is incomprehensible to students and then they're so intimidated by it that they're too scared to say that they don't understand it and all they can do is mimic it. [Laughter and applause] So mercifully, in my life, I've never had to do that, though the prose in my earlier nonfiction books, written in the '70s and '80s I will admit was a bit arch. Since I started writing fiction which was in 1990 onwards, I never thought I'd return to nonfiction. I just thought I'd write novels now, historical novels or whatever else. And then 9/11 happened, as I explained, and I started doing it. And the fact that I'd been writing fiction for ten years prior to that, for a whole decade, has affected the way I write nonfiction. Now I can't write it in the old way simply as a sort of dry, dusty polemic. I can't do that anymore. So I hope that my old fans from the old days will forgive that. I know some of them don't. But that's how I write. I write as it comes to me. I don't sort of try and think how should I write, or what should I write. Obviously I do the research and then I write as I want people to read it. I want people to get engaged with the writing and understand it. That's what determines it. It's nothing more than that.

**Marcom:** I was thinking, in *Bush in Babylon* you say at one point, 'Perhaps there are some things in life too painful to be recorded by history and which

are best left to fiction which can sometimes be more honest than history.’ And I wonder if that’s sometimes at play in your work, and certainly in your fiction as well?

**Ali:** Well, I think that is true. I remember what happened, what pushed me on the path to fiction in 1990. It was the first Gulf War which was carried out by Bush Sr., as some of you will recall. I was watching the BBC which is usually better than what we have here, but to my astonishment a very serious and senior BBC interviewee came out with the statement saying the Arabs are people without a culture. He *actually said that*. So I just sort of stood up at home in my seat and raged at the television set, and said *how dare you?* And then, after he’d finished, and I’d finished, [laughter], I did ask myself a few questions. Because I’m not a religious person, I’m not a believer and I did ask myself why is it of all the three great universal religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Islam hasn’t had a Reformation? It’s been stuck and it’s atrophied. Not the culture, but the religion. In order to answer that question I went to Spain and Portugal. This is a part of Europe which was ruled for five hundred years by the Arabs and Arab culture. Even today you have more Arab words in the Spanish and Portuguese languages than from other cultures. Those of you who go to Spain, just to give you a small example, say, *ola*. Well, the origins of *ola* are *wa’ala*, God be praised. And there are hundreds of other examples like that. I had gone to write a little essay, a monograph, on what happened to Islam in Spain, because I instinctively knew that if Islam had been allowed to stay in Europe and had functioned like the other religions - actually it was a very rich scene in Andalusia - it would have been transformed like all the others were. There is no reason why it shouldn’t be. But it was brutally exterminated together with Judaism and both Jews and Muslims were either forced to convert or forced to leave the country. So I was studying all this and I was traveling in Cordova, Granada, Seville, Malaga in the south, and I suddenly began to see the ruins of that ancient civilization. And I would sit for hours and look at it and then I just felt I had to write a novel to really evoke that civilization, real people whom none of us knew. And that is how I wrote *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*. And after reading that, dear old Edward, bless him, said, Now you can’t stop. You can’t stop and go back to nonfiction. Write the whole bloody history, he said. Tell the story of the clashes between Western Christendom and Islamic civilization in fiction. And that’s what got me started off in 1990. That’s how it happened. And then, as you know Micheline yourself, being a novelist, once you start writing fiction, there is something magical about it. As you’re writing, voices come out from within you that you never knew existed. Strange characters emerge; almost take over the novel and you’ve got to sort of pull them back in. It’s impossible to write a novel like you write nonfiction: in Chapter 1 there’ll be this, in Chapter 2, because you don’t know with fiction where it’s going to go. That’s how it happened.

**Marcom:** It’s interesting though because your novels, the Islam quintet, three of which you’ve written so far and two coming, maybe you can tell us

later a little bit about those, but they actually then led you back to nonfiction and led you to write *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* and then this latest book, *Bush in Babylon*. So it's kind of curious how you're moving into fiction then ultimately, years later, led you back into – as you said with the Gulf War but then after September 11<sup>th</sup> - back into nonfiction. They seem to work together.

**Ali:** I think they do work together. I pray that Bush won't invade any other countries so I can go back and do my next novel. [Laughter] I don't particularly want to write a book about Syria or Iran but one might have to. So I'm hoping that there's some respite because I am very keen to get back and finish off that quartet. We're not immortal. We have to, especially at this stage of my life, I find I have to try and finish these books. I do see them as an important cultural, intellectual project. It's something you can leave behind. Whether people like them or not doesn't bother me, particularly. Some will and some won't. I feel that I have to do that.

**Marcom:** I don't know of any other books like those three novels. We've talked before...especially the first book. I lived in Spain, and you know this, for a few years, and there's absolutely no mention and there's tremendous shame about the whole Moorish tradition, the Arab tradition in Spain. So that book and all three of the books, for a Western audience, really revivify or restore much of what has been unremembered historically. And I think that's true in a lot of your work actually. I've heard you say or read that you are 'greedy for history' and that's been true your whole life. I somewhat wonder, anecdotally, if, growing up as you did in Lahore, I know you were born before Partition and then your parents...after Partition, you talk about this in *Clash*, describing down the street, you'd say, Oh so-and-so a Sikh lived here, and so-and-so a Hindu lived here; the way that the dead are lurking and yet their histories. You didn't grow up learning about them formally, did you? I wonder if that's influenced your work at all in terms of your 'greed for history'?

**Ali:** Who knows? I guess it probably did have an influence: that history was always kept from us because Pakistan was a new state created in 1947 and it was as if no history had existed before it. Because in order to admit that history had existed before it the ruling elite would have had to explain then how come we formed Pakistan? And they had their own version of that history but by-and-large they didn't like to talk about it. And the fact that I was living in a town which was well-known in that sub-continent for being - 'the Paris of the East', Lahore used to be called - a totally cosmopolitan, multi-cultural town, and then suddenly, after Partition, all the Hindus and Sikhs left because they were fearful of being massacred, correctly so, and went to India. There's a very interesting....it has had a big effect on me, that, and many of Pakistan's early short-story writers and poets wrote about it. It hurt them. There was a very brilliant short-story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, unfortunately drank himself to death, presumably as a protest against the Islamic state, [laughter] I don't know. And he wrote a three-page short-

story which is brilliant. This short-story is set in the lunatic asylum in Lahore and in the lunatic asylum there are Muslim lunatics, – I'm sorry for using the word lunatic; I'm not in a very P.C. mood today. – mentally disabled people, okay, but these places were called lunatic asylums and the short-story has this; that's why I'm using it. And there were deranged Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. When news comes that the sub-continent to which they belong has been partitioned, the bureaucrats running the two countries decide that all the Hindu and Sikh lunatics have to be taken from the asylum in Lahore and sent to asylums in India. And they refuse to go. It's a very moving story. They hug each other; they kiss each other; they will not go; they refuse to go; and they are removed by force. And the short-story writer is saying that at times when the world goes insane, sanity is found in the asylum. It's a very, very, powerful short-story. So, one grew up with that as well.

Official culture tried to deny all this but there was always in that world, as I was saying earlier in the Arab world, an unofficial culture and we grew up on that culture and poetry readings and wonderful things like that. Just to show you, to stress the importance of poetry, we used to go as kids, you know, young kids, to poetry reading sessions. These were not tiny gatherings in carefully selected salons. There could be 10, 20,000 people at a poetry reading -open-air poetry readings on a summer's night. You'd have your dinner, you go, you arrive at 9:30, poetry is read and then by 4 o'clock in the morning everyone is swaying slightly in rhythm with the words and then the poets start an extempore competition of reciting extempore poetry. This was the world one grew up in and it was very rich. And the poets, as elsewhere, could say more-or-less what they wanted to do.

**Marcom:** Interesting. Well, that makes me think how in the novels, if we can move to novels for a minute, you also said in *Clash*, when you did the research for the novels, you were thinking about *mullahs* and heretics and 'the bulging vein of dissent and eroticism'. In all three of those books there is, what I would call, a strong, erotic vein or presence and the women as well, the female characters in all three books, there are these female characters, they are really agents: they're powerful, they're sexual, they're having sex, there are lesbians, there are homosexuals. All of this runs counter to the ideas, particularly in the West one holds about Islam, and particularly about women – the ideas about veiling and about repressed sexuality. I was wondering if that was deliberate or is that just what feels authentic to you? What's going on with that?

**Ali:** Well, no. I deliberately did that all because it reflected those worlds and to challenge and counter stereotypes of that society. The Islamic tradition is full of this stuff unlike Christianity, early Christianity which was very puritanical. The Pauline tradition in Christianity is not at all like that of early Islam. The problem with official Islam was, not that it was opposed to eroticism, but that it insisted that this was a male domain. So polygamy was fine but not polyandry. And what is very interesting of the world in which Islam grew up, that it's a world in which women were very strong in the

culture, pre-Islamic world. The prophet of Islam's first wife was his employer. In the modern world she would have been accused of sexual harassment because he was much younger than her. But she was a trader. She traded and she married him and later on, when Islam became a big religion, big restrictions were imposed on women which hadn't existed before. This is also, incidentally, true of Judaism. All these three religions imposed restrictions on women because they tried to develop a patriarchy, and a patriarchal society. The world of the Old Testament prophets, if you read the Old Testament, is filled with examples of this. Islam, of course, also grew up in that world.

But the point I'm making is that didn't change things too much. It meant that there was discrimination on various levels but within that world, women played quite an important role. They played it unofficially but they were there. The whole thrust of theology in Islam in relation to sexuality – it's not that they deny women's sexuality, they are frightened of it and they want to curb it which is a very different operation and a very blatant one. And I wanted to bring that out. If you read the poetry of Valada who was a poetess in Islamic Spain in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it's totally erotic. She writes erotic poetry. She had a salon. People used to discuss it. She used to attack her lovers in public, saying how awful they were in bed, etc. [Laughter] I'm not kidding. All this was there. It's written. So I've just sort of revived that and said that despite the political restrictions which were common to all religions – women weren't allowed to play a part in running the state – nonetheless, behind the scenes, they did. And they played quite an important role and they were very effective in many ways.

I remember, in one of my novels, *The Book of Saladin*, which is about the fictional memoirs of Saladin, I have scenes in his, amongst his wives, I mean, literally, two of them have a fling with each other. I was doing a reading of this in Turkey, in Istanbul, when the book was published there, and a very nervous publisher – this is an audience not unlike you but you know, different in other ways – and my Turkish publisher came up very nervously and whispered in my ear, Don't be too provocative because half the leaders of the Turkish Islamists are sitting here. So I said, no, I'm not going to be provocative but if they ask a question I will reply to it truthfully. I'm not going to mince words. When it came to question time, after I'd done a reading, a senior Islamist put up his hand and said, in *The Book of Saladin* you say that women were in love with each other. He put it mildly. So I kept a straight face, and I said, yes, what of it? And he said, but this is completely wrong because it never happened inside Islam. I said, okay. Let me put it to you like this. Let's assume you were the Sultan of Egypt in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and you had 18 official wives and 50 concubines. I said that's 68 women. I said you may be a very great guy, [laughter] but do you seriously think you would be able to satisfy the needs of all these women – intellectual, sexual, emotional, whatsoever? And all the women in the audience burst out laughing. [Laughter] So that's the reality. They don't like

to talk about it. There's a prudishness. But it existed. Otherwise you can't explain the big rise in Islamic populations. [Laughter]

Just one thing on that Micheline. Sometimes people misread books. If you look at *The Perfumed Garden* often people read it simply as a book about sex. It isn't. It's a deeply subversive book which actually challenges and pokes fun at religious orthodoxy. And in a famous scene in *The Perfumed Garden*, which many people don't get unless you know it, where the writer is describing a scene between two tribal leaders, a male and a female tribal leader in the early Islamic period, who have refused to accept Islam, he describes them as making love to each other in the positions of the ritual prayer of Islam. Now why did he do this? These books were read aloud in the story-telling tradition. It's to prick the *mullahs* essentially and worry them, and to say they're not going to accept everything you guys impose on us. And this unofficial culture has existed for a long, long time in the Arab world, without any doubt, and it exists there today.

**Marcom:** I think that what often happens in the West is that people will look at the East, or the Arab East, and see the veil, the accoutrements, the outside, and never think what goes inside or the unofficial and somehow are not able or willing to question the physicality on the outside, the outside norms. So it's interesting, because in your novels, of course, we get to see in to these specific moments. When you're talking about your criticisms of Islam, or like mentioned, in Turkey, I'm wondering, and this is a bit of a cheap question, but given the Salman Rushdie affair years ago, do you ever censor yourself when you ...or do worry at all when you criticize and analyze Islam?

**Ali:** No, I've never been worried. Some of my friends sometimes get a bit nervous but I've never been worried. I think it's, I don't particularly want to say this but the books I write, either my novels or my other books, are very appreciative of many aspects of Islamic life and culture and record its history, an honest history of it. And in the course of that, if you make criticisms as well, they are easily accepted. People don't mind that so much. Many people have come up to me when I'm doing readings or speaking in the Arab or the Islamic world and said, well, we know you're not a believer but you're doing and saying interesting things and we're glad you're opposing the war in Iraq, etc., etc. It's when they see you completely as an agent of the West that people begin to get angry. I'm afraid in Rushdie's case that has happened. This guy who was once highly regarded as a *literati* has now become a *belligerati*, linked to the needs of the American empire. This is unfortunate. And that also means his work isn't taken seriously. That's the problem.

**Marcom:** Well, given the state of the world today and you spoke a lot tonight about imperial conquest, U.S. hegemony, and the media and what they don't provide, I'm just wondering what you see...and also you've talked about in your books as well the sort of dumbing down of Western capitalist

society, which we see. You only have to take a look at *The New York Times* best-seller list, any time I've taken a peek in the last years the bulk of the books...maybe there'll be one book of literature and then it's all genre fiction, entertainment, fluff, and I'm just wondering what you see or do you see literature and your nonfiction books, these very serious books, having much influence in very corporate controlled media?

**Ali:** Well, they obviously don't have the influence which say, Ludlum does [laughter] but then I'm quite pleased about that. They have an influence in their own way. Books like this become subterranean and they're translated all over the world, they travel around the Arab world. That pleases me the most because they're quite critical of religious orthodoxy. But they are very well known in the Arab world; they've been translated. I've often been asked to go and speak about them and it pleases me greatly that lots of people in the Islamic world know them. Now in the world's largest Islamic country, Indonesia, a publishing house decided last year to translate all my novels, as well as *Clash*. And so that's nice. It means that the people I really would like to read them are reading them. But, you know, if you're a serious writer you cannot write to please. You can't have a large audience in mind when you write fiction. You always write for a handful of people who you respect, and see if they like it or not. That's all that matters. If my books are attacked by critics etc., it never bothers me, or if they're not in the best-seller list. It just really doesn't bother me at all. You don't write for that. I certainly don't; I mean, I know some people do. But I don't. It just doesn't bother me. I think if a work is good, if it has integrity, it will travel, slowly maybe, and it will remain as something for the future.

**Marcom:** I agree. One final question. I'm just wondering what sort of gives you hope and optimism in these times? What gets you up and keeps you doing this work every day? I know you travel a tremendous amount, you're speaking all the time, you're writing all the time.

**Ali:** What gives me hope is the people who come to these events. [Applause] Really. I feel that especially in the United States. Since 9/11 I've seen more of the United States than I did in my whole life before. I've been to...it's the first time I'm in New Mexico, thanks to the Lannan Foundation, but I've been to many other parts of the United States and I always get audiences...many times even people who don't agree but are interested to learn more and to discuss and to argue and that's very encouraging. That makes it imperative for people like myself and other public intellectuals to do it as much as we can because the media is incredibly powerful. If we could do it via the media – you know, just appear on Fox TV and give a one-hour lecture [laughter] every week, I would happily do that and not travel so much. But since we can't do that, then I think one has to travel and one has to do the rounds and I do it of course in the States but I also do it in other parts of the world. And there are different needs in different parts of the world. My criticisms are not simply directed against the United States foreign policy in the imperial adventure. They are also directed against religious

fundamentalists. I often tell people, here and elsewhere, that religious fundamentalism is the same the world over. It's not the case that Islamic fundamentalism is any different.

And let me leave you with one image in your minds: a few months ago, or maybe less than two months ago, the Islamic fundamentalist who carried out the bombings in Bali, when lots of innocent tourists died, was brought to trial before an Indonesian court and sentenced to death. As the death sentence was announced, he waved to people, he laughed, he smiled, he looked up towards the heavens, he was very proud. Now, that's a level of irrationality with which it's difficult to have an argument. But then, a week after that, there was the trial of a Christian fundamentalist in the United States who was sentenced to death for killing a doctor who performed abortions and who had participated in raids on abortion clinics. And when the sentence in that court was announced, his behavior was exactly the same – waving to the audience, his supporters in the court, looking up, smiling, quite pleased. And that's why I say that when people become religious fundamentalists, whether they're Christians, Muslims, or Jews, the behavior becomes very similar.

And we have a situation in this country where I think we have more fundamentalists at the top levels of the American government than we've ever had before. I mean it's not just Bush Jr. It's Ashcroft who is truly frightening and who would be very much appreciated by many Islamic fundamentalists [laughter] because they share a great deal in common. And that's why on the cover of *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* I put Bush on with a beard, precisely to show that, for which I was criticized by many people in the Islamic world. They said it makes him look too sweet and human. [Laughter]

**Marcom:** Thank you. Thank you.

**Ali:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

---