

Lusting for Literacy

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My knowledge of lust came from Joel. I sat directly across from him at Saturday school, in a house-turned-*masjid* on 168th Street and Highland Avenue in Jamaica, Queens. Joel was tall, perhaps the tallest boy in the room. I thought that he must have been in junior high school but later learned that it was only a year that separated us. He was beautiful. His skin was soft and his lashes curled. He was perfectly sculpted.

I pretended to recite Arabic reading exercises aloud without looking at my books, but I was generally mumbling nonsense as I stared at his face. I would periodically shift to prevent the carpet from imprinting its bland pattern on my bare feet. And each time I stretched my legs, or rubbed my feet to keep them from falling asleep, I would look at him. I would observe his body, his face, his eyes. But whenever I looked, his head was dutifully bowed over the *Qur'an*, as if his mind were devouring the words. He never looked back at the stranger with the lop-sided head scarf and the wandering eyes.

I knew I didn't belong in the *masjid*. I spent my cold Saturday mornings in Arabic class solely because of Joel. I progressed very slowly in the class, if learning the alphabet over a span of two months can even be called progress. The otherwise lackluster hours spent there were mostly devoted to day-dreaming. I imagined Joel approaching me after class, his hands equipped with the Word of God. I envisioned him smiling at me, his splendid mouth, the one with which he uttered those holy words, one day on my lips. I even imagined how his body intertwined with mine would one day produce lots of beautiful babies.

I was seven. And I still couldn't read Arabic.

I lusted after Joel. Those lips that smiled, those lips with which he recited divine utterances intoxicated my soul. But more than his soft lips and perfect smile, it was his head that fascinated me. His was a head that almost never looked up from reading. A mind totally engrossed in his Arabic books, in the beloved *Qur'an*.

At first, it was the physical lust that consumed me. It was a desire to become physically linked to his body. In Psychology class, I learned how there are different stages to love, that while it begins as attraction, it progresses to romance, then passion, and finally commitment. However, I could not conceive of a love that developed in stages. There was no structure to love. Instead, lust and love were inexorably linked, overwhelming, uplifting, and captivating my heart all at once.

But was it Joel, my body, my *nafs*, yearned for? Or was it the projection of Joel that had moved me as a nymph child of seven? Of course, I never gained that physical proximity to Joel, never shared an embrace, or even a conversation. Instead, I lusted after his passion, his dedication, his concentration. More than his body, I wanted to revel in his mind and his spirit. The physical desire continued to tear my senses the way your eyes flood and your nostrils burn when you've inhaled the onions and masala from your mom's spicy soup. But gradually the biological desire to eat Joel was confounded by another desire—to understand the active participation with which he engaged in the *Qur'an*. He did not merely recite scripture. He seemed to absorb it, drink and understand the verses as if the words were of secular, everyday origin rather than through the divine transmission of the Prophet. I wanted that same connection to text. I lusted for Joel because through him I first learned to desire the ability of others.

Throughout my life, I have modeled myself after others. In high school, I would borrow other peoples' characteristics. Sophomore year, I would catch myself wanting to become Sharma. I would be funnier, less serious, and very interested in Mos Def and black studies. Later I would want to become Seth, to get A's without even going to class. And then by senior year, my wandering eyes would find Moran. From him I would learn to warm my heart to others, to listen and appreciate my friends. Layer by layer, my character would develop as my eyes wandered from my books and lusted after these remarkable boys, who possessed the qualities that I lacked, whether it was the stellar bubble-filling-in ability that allowed for a 1580 SAT score or the patience to attend an 8 AM class.

Beginning in the fourth grade, I walked a mile to the Queens Central Library to do research for my weekly biography reports. The Asian librarian with the chunky legs and sheer silk blouses showed me how to find books in the Youth division, but every time I entered through the wooden arch, I was wrought with paranoia. My palms liquefied as I feared that the books I needed for my report were already checked out, leaving me with only secondary sources like encyclopedias with which to do my research. To read paragraph

summaries of the lives of famous people seemed like an easy but cheap trick because I missed out on the drama and complexity that make autobiographies worth reading. But just as I was afraid to be left with only the *World Book Encyclopedia* to extract information from, I also appreciated the concise, linear structure of the encyclopedic entries. I liked how the infinite wealth of knowledge was systematically alphabetized and catalogued, making the facts and dates of a good report accessible to me.

Yet I knew the seemingly simplistic composition of the encyclopedia belied its inherent contradiction. How can all of knowledge be reduced to 23 volumes of the alphabet (xyz was a single volume)? How can a one-dimensional book that prided itself on objectivity further your quest for understanding if it reduced people, events, and nations to dates, facts, and maps? What could you gain from a secular book that did not allow emotion and colorful nuances to shape its interpretation? Despite its reductionist logic, the encyclopedia offered a short cut that I continued to exploit when writing my reports.

The use of secondary sources instead of primary documents for my assignments did not bother me, just as my lust for Joel never seemed like a moral dilemma. The English-translated *Qur'an* did not seem problematic either. Secondary sources were just another roundabout way to arrive at the same ideas.

But was there something lost in the translation?

In my “Images of the Orient” class, I learned that with each translation of a particular trope (whether a hookah pipe or odalisque) in nineteenth century French Orientalist art, the trope changes. The recycled image is rendered unique by each artist. For example, Nicholas de Nicolay’s 1567 travel book included the first pictorial representations of a veiled woman and her slave adorned with what appears to be a large and decorative lamp as a head-piece on their way to the bath. What appears at first to be only an amusing engraving has influenced the works of many subsequent French Orientalist artists, including Ingres, who in his rendering of the *Turkish Bath* (1808) relocates the now unveiled woman in an orgy of naked bodies that lie about leisurely, some napping, others prancing around. Ingre’s translation of the veiled woman created a nuance in reading the *hammam*, or Turkish bath.

Perhaps one of my favorite images from the class however is *Hodja in Yellow Caftan* (1905) by Hamdi Bey. In it, a woman sits with her legs tucked under her almost metallic gold-patterned caftan, with its wrists stylishly cut and embroidered. The red bandanna tied around her hair looks like a split watermelon, ready to be eaten. Despite the woman’s costume and keen fash-

ion sense, I am drawn to her eyebrows, which are knit as her eyes are solely focused on the *Qur'an*. It seems she is not merely reciting the Book. She is thinking, interpreting, maybe even questioning. Nevertheless her focus is the Book. A book I have yet to read.

The *Qur'an* is positioned in the center of painting, perhaps to divide the canvas into two parts. Directly behind the reading woman is the mosaic wall, patterned with hexagons within dark-blue Stars of David. The ordered tiles are on the right but to the left is a contortedly screened window behind which tall conifers stand pregnant with red fruit. But instead of metal safety bars across the window frame as would be found enclosing me within my 21st century apartment building, the window is covered with a bronze metal that has been twisted and elongated into a chaotic pattern that seeks to rearrange the background. It does not overtake the background like safety screens often do, but it does create the illusion of a nature jigsaw puzzle.

The many elements to my personality were like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, stolen and collected from all those that I admired. The intelligence was borrowed from Seth; the racial commentary was a remnant of Sharma; the rare bouts of sincerity I learned from Moran. And the lust was from Joel. I had gradually imprinted these people into my psyche. I was a composite of these collected qualities and traits.

I was the composite Muslim who did not choose between the encyclopedia and the translated *Qur'an*. I did not choose between lust and literacy. I did not choose because I could not choose. There was no distinct choice between physicality and spirituality, between illiteracy and literacy. The *Qur'an* in the painting does not divide the room as I had once thought it did. The woman's ability to read the *Qur'an*, too, does not create a barrier between the open window and the ordered pattern of the mosaic wall. Rather, the *Qur'an* serves to integrate the differences between the disorder of the open window and the order of the man-made mosaic. It is Islam that integrates the secular world of lust with the divine text of creation in an amalgamation of color and emotion and reason.

In an attempt to create a dichotomy between the secular world of lust and the quasi-divine realm of the translated *Qur'an*, I have alienated myself from the truth of hybridism. By denying my hybridity, I have failed to learn the *Qur'an* in Arabic because I feel that somehow a part of my wretched secular self will be lost in translation. But ultimately, I do not need to relinquish my lust for God. I can find Him, despite lust.

Joel was the first piece to my inner mosaic, and he left an indelible mark like no one since. Lust began earlier and traveled deeper than any of my other

borrowed traits. Lust began in my body but enhanced the pores of my mind with an intense yearning to mold, to shape, to sculpt myself into a better Muslim. Perhaps lust was the prerequisite for being a better Muslim. To hold the *Qur'an* with the same degree of reverence, with the same degree of knowledge and understanding that Joel possessed, with the same degree of concentration as the woman in the painting, was all I desired. I lusted after the *Qur'an* so I could find the textual Islam I had been avoiding for so long.

Ideally, *Qur'anic* literacy should bring me closer to God. I know that if I cannot read the Word of God, then I can neither learn to authenticate my life with Islam nor appreciate the beauty of the *Qur'an*. I cannot function in *masjids* or in Arabic class. I cannot function as a Muslim because I cannot read the *Qur'an*.

Nevertheless, I purposely sought illiteracy for the past eighteen years. My Pickthall translation of the Glorious *Qur'an* has left me complacent. Out of convenience, I have clung to my English translation, just as I have clung to Joel as my very own secondary source to greatness, just as I have resorted to the half-truths of the *World Book Encyclopedia* for my biography reports.

Even without absorbing melodious *Qur'anic* recitation, the Islam in my heart continues to grow. While the seeking of knowledge is compulsory for Muslims, my particular lust is also integral to my *iman*, or faith. Lust is a natural and necessary part of everyday human experience that does not impede the moral dictates of religion. In fact, I reaffirmed my Islam through secular means, by ogling the beautiful boy from my Saturday Arabic class. "There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane," writes Seyyed Hossain Nasr, a prolific scholar of Islamic Studies. "[W]hat we now call the ordinary or every day is integrated into the matrix of the sacred." Somehow the ordinary act of lust brings me closer to my faith because, like Joel, I wanted to know God.

Without ever speaking to me, Joel reminded me that I was all style and no substance. I was a fake because I could not read Arabic but continued to love Islam. The qualities I borrowed I eventually managed to integrate into my own personality. Lust, sincerity, humor, intelligence—they are part of the Sadia-package now. But the *Qur'an* never became my own because I could not pass off the translation as anything other than a translation, a secondary source.

I started attending Arabic classes again this semester. Unfortunately, this time there is no beautiful boy cross-legged and facing me across the room. Now, there is a partition that cuts through the room, flimsy but effective dividers that separate the boys and the girls. But here I was no longer look-

ing for lust of a boy, but lust of my faith, something that I had not lost, because it had never been found. I wanted to be able to read and satisfy my lust.

One of the first chapters I examined in class was Sura Iqra. When the angel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) as a man, the angel said, “Recite.” “I can not recite,” the Prophet replied. He then describes how the angel whelmed him in his embrace. When he let the Prophet go, Gabriel commanded “Recite.” Again, the Prophet replied that he could not recite. And again Gabriel squeezed the Prophet and let him go only when he was exhausted. Then he said, “Recite,” and the Prophet said, “I cannot recite.” Finally, Gabriel squeezed for a third time and said, “Read in the name of your lord, who created (all that exists) man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous!” Gabriel said in Arabic:

*Iqra biismi rabbika allatbee khalaqa
Khalaqa alinsana min Aaalaqin
Iqra warabbuka alakramu
Allatbee Aallama bialqalami
AAallama alinsana ma lam ya Alam*

And my English *Qur'an* translates:

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created—
Created man from a (mere) clot of congealed blood.
Read! And thy Lord is the Most Bountiful.
He Who taught (the use of) the pen—
Taught man that which he knew not.

It's as if these words are inscribed on my heart, just as the Prophet said. Indeed, God taught me what I knew not: literacy found via lust.