

From The Times

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## Martin Amis reviews *The Islamist*:

**Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left** by Ed Hussain

THIS IS HEARSAY, but I have heard it said that the Islamist recruitment gambit, or chat-up line, seldom varies. You are a young British Muslim, in London or Leeds, and you are towelling yourself down after a table tennis tournament or a paintball fest at your community centre, and another young British Muslim wanders up and says, in the accent of Leeds or London: "Heard about the Caliphate, mate?" "You what?" "The Caliphate. The *Khili-fah*." The caliphate, as every Islamist is bitterly aware, was dissolved by Kemal Ataturk on March 3, 1924. It is the Islamists' intention to restore the sultan as the head of a nation state, a nation state of science-fictional power, which will (if I've got this right) wage jihad on all the world.

*The Islamist* is a tale of gradual radicalisation, wholehearted fanaticism, crisis, disillusion, and gradual disinfection. British by birth and Indo-Pakistani by descent, Ed Husain was an obedient child who, during adolescence, came under the sway of a *pir*, or mystic master. Fulholy Saheb taught little Ed *tajwid*, or the art of Koranic recital; other routines included *dhikr* (chanting Arabic names of God in the dark) and *mawlid* (rehearsing the miracles that attended the Prophet's birth). Ed loved the attention, and the sense of unity. "In many ways," he writes, "I suppose I was a sort of Muslim choirboy."

With his piety and thick spectacles, the growing Husain was a bullied loner at Stepney Green secondary. While his contemporaries affiliated themselves with the Brick Lane Mafia or the Bow Massive, Husain signed up with the Young Muslim Organisation, whose members seemed as "bad and cool as the other street gangs, just without the drugs, drinking, and womanising". The YMO owed allegiance to the Jamaat-e-Islami, founded in 1941 by a Pakistani journalist named Abul Ala Mawdudi, who championed a politicised Islam as "a complete code of life". Husain's parents, and his *pir*, would have been less horrified if he had joined the Cannon Street Posse.

An ideology is in the business of aggrandising those who subscribe to it, and Husain was soon assured that he was vastly superior to pretty well everyone, all women ("women are the plague"), all Jews (of course), all *kafirs* (or *koofs*), and all "partial Muslims", such as his mother and father (soon to be jettisoned). Endearingly, though, the tenor of Husain's teenage years goes on seeming reasonably teenage. Whereas other boys smuggled pornography into their rooms, "my contraband consisted of books written by Islamist ideologues".

Turning to a more radical mosque, he can pray bareheaded without messing up his hairstyle. Islamist chicks, in their *jilbabs* and *niqabs*, are far more alluring than all those *kafir* nudists. Spurning both promiscuity and arranged marriages, Islamists tend to elope; and divorce rates among them, Husain reveals, are unIslamically high. The more common pattern – Husain's pattern – is to keep your sexual tension stoppered, and work it off with religious rage.

In organisational terms, Islamism is Leninist. The radicals, with their advanced consciousness, form a vanguard, and seek power in the name not of the supranational proletariat but of the *ummah*, the supranational community of believers. Reliant on cadres ( *halaqas* ), fiercely destructive in debate, and desperately alert to "deviation", the Mawdudis, Wahhabis, and Nabhanis are as fissiparous as the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, and the Socialist-Revolutionists of 1917. "The YMO are a bunch of losers," Husain is eventually told. The time has come for him to hear about the Caliphate. We now rise up into a new echelon. This is a creedal movement vigorously suppressed in all Muslim countries, but not here – the Hizb ut-Tahrir.

I think we may be putting it mildly when we say that the Hizb vision remains slightly counter-intuitive. Well,

here is Husain at his most enthusiastic about what he grandly calls “the *khilifah* system”: “We were single-minded in our pursuit of establishing a clear Islamic state, for in the obtaining of political power lay all the answers to the problems of the Muslim nation. Our arguments were powerful and, at first, undefeatable. ‘If we had the Islamic state, then the caliph would send the Islamic army to slaughter the Serbs,’ was our answer to the Balkan conflict . . . More precisely, our foreign policy was to conquer and convert.”

The Islamic state – soon to appear, probably by coup, though no one knows exactly where – is imaginable enough. But one may wonder at its military prepotence. Why is this pan-Islamic army so much mightier than the pan-Islamic army that has kept trying and failing to defeat Israel? And what about the armies of, say, Europe, India, Russia, China, and America? It is a tribute to the power of ideology, of shared illusion, that someone as bright as the author could live for so long at this distance from likelihood. Two events disabused him. One was a killing. “The fucking Christian niggers need to be taught a lesson,” argued a colleague, after a dispute at Tower Hamlets College (the dispute was about the use of a pool table); and Husain duly sees the black boy lying in a pool of blood. The second event had to do with a woman, his future wife: “Of the many faces I encountered on a daily basis there was one belonging to a girl called Faye that did what mine used to do a lot: smile. As an Islamist I had lost my ability to smile.”

Although Husain doesn’t make too much of this epiphany, we can imagine the inner rearrangement; hereafter, sexual tension is eased, not by religious rage, but by sexual love.

This was in 1996. During his detox and rehab period, Husain reembraced the gentle Sufism of his *pir*. He also did something that may be recommended to all British Islamists: he spent time in Islamic lands. Not a long weekend in some Waziristani boot camp (where, one gathers, it’s car-bombs all morning, poisons and acids all afternoon, and maniacal misogyny all evening), but extended stays in Syria and Saudi Arabia. Husain comes to love Damascus, despite the sexism, racism, homophobia, and the hero-isation of such questionable figures as Hitler and Saddam Hussein. But he can do nothing with the “loss, mayhem, perversion and hypocrisy” of Riyadh and Jeddah. His wife is continually accosted and propositioned with hisses and whispered obscenities. And when they visit the Prophet’s tomb – dicing with *shirk* (polytheism, idolatry), which is *haram* (forbidden) – we “risk being kicked in the face by the Wahhabi guards if we so much as bow our heads”. By now we are used to the idea of sexual tension and religious rage in counterbalance within an individual psyche; in Saudi Arabia tension and rage are the twin predicates of an entire society.

Ed Husain has written a persuasive and stimulating book. But as he builds to his affirmatory conclusion he visits a false dichotomy on us, and one that has recently gained an undeserved respectability. He wants to be “free from the fanaticism of secularism or religion”; he wants to “oppose hatred of all forms, secular and religious” Site is currently unavailable .Please come back later