

A Watery Pilgrimage: An Essay

By Ahsan Chowdhury

Marlow, the narrator, in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* describes the Muslim pilgrims onboard Jim's ship as the followers of an "exacting faith." His comment is typical of the post-Enlightenment Westerners' bewilderment at the apparently nit-picky Islamic rites and rituals that Muslims themselves perform without feeling burdened. I came to appreciate one aspect of the "exacting" nature of Islam anew during the *Umra* or the lesser *Hajj* that my wife and I undertook in the winter of 2018. I refer to the Islamic injunction upon the faithful to perform their ablutions before each of the five-times-a-day mandatory prayer. From one prayer to another, if you fart, urinate, or—Allah forbid—accidentally brush against a dog or a pig, or worse still, fondle one, you lose the state of purity and must perform your ablutions all over again.

The abstemiousness enjoined upon the faithful by their Prophet makes perfect sense in the light of the exactitude demanded of them in terms of cleanliness. The time and effort needed to maintain the state of ritual cleanliness increases in proportion to the intake of food and drink and the resultant bodily waste. The wiry constitution of the early Arab Muslims must have been badly jolted by the rich viands that came as a windfall with the acquisition of a vast Caliphate within a few decades of the passing away of their Prophet. Along with their decadent cuisine, vast labyrinthine harems, and complex machinery of government, the newly conquered and imperfectly converted peoples of these ancient empires bequeathed upon their new masters the gift of lavish baths and intricate water works. Many a Muslim historian would have occasion to lament this watershed moment that supposedly compromised the Arab's hardy constitution, on the one hand, and watered down the purity of his monotheism, on the other. The Caliphs of Damascus and Baghdad—mere kings and despots and

not to be confused with the first four rightly guided Caliphs, the best among the blessed Companions of the Prophet, who ruled the Muslim *Umma* from Medina in the decades immediately following the Messenger's passing—allegedly paid lip service to the most precious *Tawhid* so that they could enjoy the idolatrous adoration of their subjects with impunity not unlike the God-Kings of the pre-Islamic past. Such is the belief of the *Salafis*, the purest of believers of our time, inspired by the teachings of the fiery late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Islamist ideologues Abul A'la al-Maududi and Hassan al-Banna. Most *Salafis* devote themselves to the peaceful restoration of what they believe is the pure Islam practiced by the Prophet before it became encrusted with the filth of *shirk* introduced by the pseudo-Caliphs and their pagans-turned Muslim subjects. To piggyback on *Daesh* propaganda which opportunistically feeds on Salafist rhetoric, these upstart Caliphs and their subjects, Arab and Non-Arab alike, shed a humongous amount of water out of vanity, but not enough blood to rid the faith of all sorts of heathen customs. An egregious oversight the apocalyptic Caliphate known in the West as the Islamic State had just set out to correct with many a public beheading along with the persecution of bad and non-Muslims, dynamiting of pre-Islamic monuments, and bulldozing of Sufi shrines before the infidel West and its allies in the Islamic world ganged up on it and forced it into hiding once again. Tongue-waggers and troublemakers, however, never miss the opportunity to point out that these fleshly Caliphs merely relaxed the death-grip of the orthodoxy a little to allow a few pragmatic policies to flourish. Not long after these worldly Muslims had reached the Iberian peninsula and Allah suffered them to establish their fleetingly thriving kingdoms and principalities, they became the obsessively clean, meticulously dressed, punctiliously well-mannered, and heretically inclined Islamic mandarins whom the true-blooded and methodically unwashed Castilians so passionately hated and longed to wipe off the face of the earth.

Picture this for a moment. A lesser Moorish lord, an underling of the fabled Boabdil who wept so tragically, standing in the courtyard of his house to receive a victorious Castilian lord. The bow-legged little man in dented armor saunters in with a smirk on his long, narrow pockmarked face. A veritable reincarnation of Saint Iago, the Moor Slayer. He halts abruptly in front of the central fountain in the small geometrically laid-out garden, casually plucks out his pox-scarred but proudly foreskin-sheathed penis from his soiled codpiece and lets loose a yellow arc into the sparkling water. The Moor lowers his sad dark eyes lined with kohl, surreptitiously sniffs at the sachet filled with sweet-smelling herbs concealed in the palm of his right hand, and quietly thanks Allah that he is not standing downwind of the reeking barbarian. The stinking heroes of the Reconquista would soon turn up as Conquistadors at the gates of the well-populated and opulent cities in the New World, and many a simpering Inca and Aztec Lord would have occasion to share the hapless Moor's sentiments. Allow a few more centuries to pass, and voila! You get the descendants of the conquistadors and pioneers of various sorts in the Americas who are as obsessively given to cleanliness and gourmandizing—more likely to be so in North America than in the increasingly climate-challenged South—as the Moors and the Incas of yore.

Unlike the children of the assorted conquistadores, pilgrims, pioneers and settlers who still hold political and cultural sway in the Americas notwithstanding the Alt-right's protestations to the contrary, Muslims from different parts of the Islamic world who have found a precarious seat at the still relatively bountiful table of opportunities in the United States of America and Canada are merely—to put a spin on Nick Carraway's self-deprecating reference to his days of soldiering in the First World War—the beneficiaries of a belated Islamic migration, a latter-day playing out of their exacting faith's initial grand quest for *lebensraum* beyond

its Arabian heartland. Instead of wielding scimitars, some Muslims have finally made it to the Americas clutching passports, language proficiency test results, and various diplomas and certifications. Others arrive from Syria, the Horn of Africa, or Afghanistan with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The vast majority among them are content to accept the West as it is, with its seemingly endless supply of relatively cheap *halal* food, clean water to bathe in and perform ablutions with, streets relatively free from traffic jams, landmines, and marauding militias. Many consider themselves material as well as spiritual refugees from an Islamic world distorted and corrupted by centuries of Western colonialism as well as decades of misrule by nominally Muslim rulers. The West is a marvelous wilderness to these latter-day Islamic Puritans and Saints, a “savage garden”—to borrow that rock-star-among-vampires Lestat de Lioncourt’s favorite phrase—full of spectacular temptations that must be endured and overcome for the sake of their children. One of the measures that these fretful parents take to ensure that their children would grow up to be good Muslims living in the West, but not of it, is to take them on pilgrimages to Mecca at an early age.

So it was that last winter, my wife and I, a childless couple, found ourselves among a group bound for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It was made up mostly of Muslim Canadian parents of different ethnicities and their children and a handful of single young men. The following is made up of my musings on the watery foibles of practicing Muslims who are no better or worse in this regard—I mean with regard to foibles, watery or otherwise—than practicing adherents of other faiths or, for that matter, practicing skeptics of all shades.

In Mecca, we had to pay extra for the privilege of staying in the Swedish chain Movenpick because of the quick access to and the spectacular view of the Mosque of Holy Sanctuary and the Kaaba it provides. It was not the latest sleep

technology, or the ultra-thin HD panel on the wall, or the plush carpeting that drew my attention, however. It was the washroom, or *hammam* in Arabic, complete with a porcelain foot bath for the faithful to wash his or her feet in, and a hose ending in a small showerhead, secured to a wall bracket next to the oversized toilet, to be used by the believers to wash their nether regions after passing solid waste. No bathtub for the faithful! Nary a bathtub anywhere from blessed Medina to bountiful Mecca no matter how many stars the hotel you have checked into boasts of. It is most likely dictated by the injunction upon the true believers to be modest at all times. Islamic angels who are always watching over Muslims would surely be offended by the sight of a hirsute fifty-year-old brother like myself with a bulging middle lying naked in a bathtub, or, worse still, a young nubile Muslim sister taking a bath of pink fragrant bubbles. Instead of a tub, there is always a shower stall, and the plumbing is rather predictably iffy. You turn the shower on, stand underneath the pelting water, and feel a tepid pool forming around your ankles. After you finish and open the stall door, the scummy water spills out and floods the floor. You could hope that the water would evaporate of its own accord without leaving behind a slippery layer before the wife or the children decide to visit the washroom, or you could try calling room service and hope that a bellboy would eventually show up and be baksheeshed into unclogging the drain. Whether you do it yourself or resort to the ministrations of an obsequious lackey—almost invariably a Rohingya or Bengali Muslim—these bathrooms are always wet and exude an odor made up partly of human waste and strong cleaning agents. Quite the contrast to the marble topped vanity and Italian tiles on the walls. The wetness is always there along with the smell. It is because the faithful are always performing their ablutions when not taking a long shower (mandatory after intercourse or going number two) while still wearing some sort of a covering.

Born in the Indian subcontinent, and figuratively speaking, a mere third-generation (or *talata* as our Arab brethren sometimes affectionately refer to us) Muslim tainted by cohabiting with idolatrous Hindus, I grew up watching adults obsessively washing themselves in ponds, at standpipes installed by the municipality to provide drinking water to the urban poor, around hand-cranked tube wells in rural areas, or in detached washrooms shared by several families. I recall being told more than once that the washroom is a place of impurity because people who enter them leave behind their bodily waste as well as spiritual taint and come out in a state of purity. If not the Great Satan himself, his countless minions surely haunt all washrooms. Mayhap the ubiquitous stench emanating even from the washrooms in four-star hotels in the land blessed by the touch of the Prophet's holy feet I spoke of earlier is the sulphurous air the evil cohorts exhale through their hideous nostrils. Bath houses, lavatories, and washstands reserved for ablutions used to be segregated from the mosque and the house proper in Muslim majority countries. Growing influence of the decadent West has led to more and more affluent households adopting indoor baths and the devilish paraphernalia of bathtubs, scented candles, and magazines.

We had a taste of both worlds in Mecca: the luxuriously appointed bathrooms in our hotel suits and the pillbox-like structures that house the toilets and the adjacent open-air ablution stations outside the perimeters of the Mosque of the Holy Sanctuary. One aspect that unites the old and the new is the ever-present wetness and the stench. It might be difficult for someone in the Godless West who has never been to the Islamic East to appreciate the kind of wetness I speak of. Sure, there is the halfmoon shaped patch of stubbornly sticky ammoniac wetness underneath the urinals in men's washrooms that you have to carefully avoid as you void yourself while standing up grotesquely like a dog on its hindlegs instead of squatting modestly as the Holy Prophet used to do while

hitching up his chaste *abaya* above his waist. There is also the seasonal wet gunk deposited by patrons walking in with their snow and dirt-encrusted boots, unless it happens to be one of those upscale public washrooms receiving the regular ministrations of a squad of recent-immigrant dentists and psychologists from third-world countries who have resigned themselves to being janitors after giving up on their hope of obtaining the license to practice in Canada.

No indeed, dear reader! I speak not of the washrooms of the West which treats cleanliness as an end rather than as a means to a higher objective. In the Islamic East it is not only the patrons, who leave their bodily waste behind in order to enter a state of purity to commune with the divine, but the caretakers, who stand outside holding a long-handled rubber squeegee with both hands as immobile as the expression on their faces, also pursue a higher goal than the ones the aforementioned non-practicing dentists-and-pharmacists-turned janitors do in the lands ruled by the Great Satan. Take for instance, Abdullah, a 63-year-old cleaner from Bangladesh, I ran into outside one of the grey pillbox-like structures that house the toilets in the outer circle of the Mosque of the Holy Sanctuary. I had just come out of one of the many stalls fitted with a squatting toilet after going number one. One too many carafes of the delicious *halal* punch served at the lavish buffet would do that to you. I had forgotten to recite under my breath the short prayer in Arabic you are supposed to recite before you enter the lavatory. Even as I squatted, instead of the prescribed prayer I indulged in one of my bouts of Satan-inspired cogitation. *If only the believers had not gorged themselves at the buffet! Is that a hint of the Hawaiian style halal beef pizza I detect along with the overtone of Daal Makhni and Tandoori Naan chased down with generous helpings of Pistachio Haagen-Dazs emanating from this stall still occupied by a good Muslim! I am definitely not going into that unoccupied one which smells of partially digested New Zealand mutton curry eaten with long-*

grain Himalayan basmati! Pinching my nostrils with a thumb and a forefinger, I manage to void my bladder into a toilet bowl full of still-steaming turds someone neglected to flush down and wash my circumcised penis with a powerful jet of cold water from the ubiquitous shower-hose and stagger out into the narrow passage between the two rows of stalls facing each other. With my dehelmeted member still stinging from the vigorous stream and suffering from “significant shrinkage,” to quote a beloved character from *Seinfeld*, I totter down the sloshy wet passage toward the exit and narrowly avoid a very tall and proportionally wide brother, whose flushed and contorted face tell a woeful tale of distressed bowels, entering the facility at a very high speed.

Once safely outside the pillbox, I am greeted by Abdullah whose snowy beard is of the length and state of grooming that would have passed muster with our Prophet. He extends a square of paper towel toward me and nods knowingly. In my hurry to get out I must have missed the paper towel dispenser and the forced air dryer. As I wipe my face and hands, Abdullah decides to make small talk in Urdu about the pleasantness of the Meccan winter. His small round features, short spare stature, dark complexion, and the tell-tale accent made it easy for me identify him as a fellow Bengali. Switching from Urdu to a dialect of Bengali full of harsh sibilants rather than the soft, well-rounded vowels of the “standard” Bengali spoken by the Hindu Bengali who live in West Bengal in India across the border from Bangladesh, Abdullah told me the story of his life in the span of a few minutes. He was about to retire after serving Allah for 30 long years and looked forward to retiring in Bangladesh where he had constructed with his *halal* income no less than two brick houses: one in his ancestral village, another in the outskirts of Dhaka, the capital city. The one in Dhaka was six stories tall, although according to the building plan approved by the city government it was supposed to be no more than four stories. When Allah has seen

it fit to write down a six-story building in His servant's fate, a piece of paper stamped and signed by a godless bureaucrat is of no consequence. Two of his sons are attending one of the new-model *madrassas* in Dhaka where they teach you English and math in addition to Allah's *kalam*. The eldest will graduate next year as a *hafiz*. *O ye believers, who among you is better than the hafiz who has "made the Koran safe" by learning every word in it by heart so that even if Allah in His Infinite Wisdom allows the disbelievers to prevail temporarily and destroy all the written copies, His words shall live on, secure in the purified heart of the hafiz.* It costs a lot of money to pay for his sons' education, but whatever he makes in the service of Allah and the baksheesh the faithful shower him with help him make both ends meet. His other sons look after his farmlands and prized disease-resistant cattle in the countryside. Even as Abdullah finished telling his tale, believers kept exiting the pillbox trailing rivulets of water. He stood there silently looking downwards, seeing something other than the sloppy wet floor, perhaps admiring his own neat and spartan form reflected on it. By this time, I had become familiar enough with the body language of the retainers in the service of Allah to take out a ten *riyal* note from the pocket of my *abaya* and hand it to him. He pocketed it without even looking at it and said with a smile,

“Another *Haji* just gave me a hundred *riyal* note, but you being a *desi* brother whatever you have given me is like a million *riyals* to your humble servant.”

With these words Abdullah dismissed me and looked past me at the brothers emerging from the pillbox. I stood there absorbing the sense of fulfillment emanating from the spare form of this servant of Allah. Not one but two multistoried brick and concrete houses, one proudly six-storied in defiance of city regulations, thriving livestock, a large parcel of land tilled diligently by three of his stalwart sons by his first wife while the other two borne by his younger

favorite wife memorize the Koran in a seminary, so that when they die they may avail themselves of the boon granted by Allah to those who memorize the Koran: take their parents to paradise with them. Here was I, a childless man of fifty living in a heavily mortgaged house in an industrial city in Western Canada with a wife scarred by two ectopic pregnancies, with not even a pet for company—cats and birds are permitted to the faithful, but my wife is allergic to the former and I to the latter—let alone livestock. I glanced over my shoulder at the receding figure of Abdullah as I hurried toward the rows of open-air ablution stalls along the low concrete walls that separate the Mosque of the Holy Sanctuary from the profane ground. The following thoughts occurred to me before I lost myself in the sea of believers seething and churning beyond the barriers.

Although by standards worldly and otherworldly, I live an unfulfilled life, what with my lack of dwarfish disease-resistant native cattle and Koran-securing sons, I do share with Abdullah a shot at salvation—admittedly a very long one. Not being able to afford maid service, I clean the washrooms at our house. Given that my pious wife—growing ever more pious since her near-death ectopic pregnancies—and her parents are constantly performing the ablutions before the five mandatory diurnal prayers, not to mention the intensified bouts of purification required during the month of Ramadan, I spend a considerable amount of time on my hands and knees scrubbing, wiping, and polishing. My parents-in-law, who have resigned themselves to my rather cavalier attitude toward the daily prayers and the Ramadan fast, never fail to utter the prescribed *Masha Allahs* and *Alhamdulillahs* every time I put the finishing touches to the sink, the toilet bowl, and the useless bathtub. I return the favor at least once a day when I return home from work and find perfectly cooked mouth-watering curries that the old couple so painstakingly and lovingly prepare from scratch. It is a sight to behold my father-in-law, a retired GP, seated at the small dinette that also

serves as a cutting board, deftly chopping and dicing zucchinis and bottle gourds and my mother-in-law standing guard over something already cooking on the electric stove and yelling at him over the noisy hood fan:

“Don’t slice it too thin or it would melt! It’s a curry I am going to cook! Not mush!”

“There is no pleasing you, woman!” my father-in-law would yell back.

The shrill voice of my wife would emanate out of the open door to the basement on the other side of the kitchen.

“How many times do I have to tell you kids to shut the door. You are stinking up my collection.” Her “collection” being the wares in her boutique of East Indian women’s dresses and accessories that supplements my unpredictable income from sessioning.

My mother-in-law would stir the cooking pot with a wooden spoon and tell me,

“Remember the *Hadith* about the fallen woman who gave the thirsty dog a drink of water and was rewarded with paradise?”

I think what the kind old lady is getting at is that I, also a fallen Muslim of sorts after years of studying and teaching English literature interpreted through faithless theoretical lenses, am performing an act of piety by cleaning the washrooms. Allah in His infinite mercy might decide to award me a place in one of the lesser heavens for rendering this humble but essential service to the faithful.