

Confessions and conversations

Poet, politician and polymath

**A chat between
Dr Hamidullah and Sadida Athaullah**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

SHY and self-effacing as he was, posterity should thank Dr Hamidullah's great grand-niece Sadida for being able to engage him in some short conversations over a period of time, presumably, after he had moved from Paris to Wilkes Barre and later to Jacksonville in Florida. The only condition he laid down was that these should not be published in his life time. One can naturally look forward not only to an interesting record of an interesting life, but also to some rich new history or historical material about the long and eventful times he lived through.

What we publish now are some random selections from the conversations which Sadida was able to pick up in the first few grief-stricken weeks after her bereavement. She hopes to work on the recordings during the summer (she teaches as well as goes to university) and publish them by late autumn. Insha-Allah.

SADIDA: As the scion of A family dedicated to Islamic scholarship arid famous for having produced teachers, writers and Qadis and Faqihs, did you always want to study Islamic Law and write as you have indeed spent most of your life doing so? Or was this God's Will?

DR. HAMIDULLAH: [This was] God's Will.

Are you saying that having a grandfather, who authored more than 30 books; father who also wrote a significant number of books; and even sisters who were published writers, these had no influence on your choice of career?

My first choice was to be a poet [Laughs]; second to be a travel writer. You have read my first article titled 'Nilgiri'[1926] followed by [those about] Madras and Hyderabad [Deccan]. The plan was to write about, all the different cities I visit but by then I had entered college and other things became more interesting.

You have had some of the most famous people of the 19th and 20th century as your peers or mentors, both from the east and the west. You had Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) and Muhammad Asad (1900-92) as your editors. You have been able to exchange ideas and interact with Yusuf Ali (1872-1953), Sulaiman Nadvi (1884- 1953), Abul 'Ala Mawdudi (1903-79) and T.B. Irving (1914-2002) as well as orientalists like Louis Massignon (1883-1962)- Can you recall who among them influenced you most?

And many many more!

It was my good fortune to be in *Madinah al-Munnawwarah* before the Second World War and while there, I studied the Qur'an with a very old respected teacher. I made corrections on how I pronounced some words that used to trouble me at that time. He traced his teachers all the way to our beloved Prophet, *Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam*.

Can you imagine! The Qur'an is passed on from God to Angel Gabrielle who conveyed it to the Prophet, *Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam*, who conveyed it to the first generation of Muslims and so on; all the way down to us!

Incredible! So this has never ceased to amaze and fascinate me to this day.

People say a lot of negative things about orientalists. You only focus on replying to their criticism. What's the reason for this?

Traditionally, Muslims have studied Islam with [the help of] a teacher. The teacher who learnt it from another teacher from an earlier generation, who studied it. from someone from an even earlier generation. Sometimes information passed along is not written down, but communicated orally. Sometimes [when] a student is not able to grasp the concept, the teacher is able to clarify and explain.

The orientalists who decided to study Islam did not have access to this tradition; they had to depend on limited resources and their own reasoning. So [for them] focusing on questions that [may] stop them from embracing Islam is more productive [than knowing Islam itself].

A French writer calls you a great apologist for Islam. Do you agree with him?

[Laughs] Sounds kind of nice! Does it not? What people have to say about me does not really bother me. Islam, God and the Prophet, *Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam*, don't need apologists. When people are not able to comprehend something, they think others who think differently have to be explained. Some people think I am paid by the Iranians, others think by Saudi Arabia and still others think I am a western agent. Everyone is entitled to their opinion.

And Allah knows best?

[Laughing] Yes. And you, too, since you have become my ‘finance minister’.

Pickthall and some other scholars are of the opinion that when translating from Arabic to another language, [the word] Allah cannot be translated. You use the equivalent word such as God as English and Dieu in French etc. What is your reasoning for this?

My research shows that even in the days of the Prophet, *Sall-Allah alayhi wa sallam*, the Qur’an was translated into other languages. Salman al-Farsi translated it into Persian and the Persian word for the Deity was used. So I prefer it [using the non-Arabic equivalent of Allah]. I think, I [have] explained that in great detail in my introduction to the French translation of the Qur’an.

I hear you are a good poet and serious enough to have even adopted a takhallus, a poetic pen name. Then what happened?

I don’t know who gave you this false information? [grins] You are allowed to change your mind about career choices. I was probably ten or 11-years-old when I wanted to be a poet. [In those days] There was a lot of discussion and celebration of Hali’s poetry after his death, and I was fascinated [by his poetry].

Since Altaf Hussain Hali* died in 1914 it would mean you were about six then. I heard that your relatives made you memorise his poetry and you used to recite it with great fervour. You must have impressed everyone by the way you did this as people still remember it.

* Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali was born in 1837 in Panipat, near Delhi, where he died on 30 September 1914. He was a disciple of another great poet, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797 or 1798-1859) and the collection of his poetry has been published under the title *Diwan_e_Hali*.

I don't remember being [any] impressive but the elders were encouraging [me]. You can date my poetical career as beginning sometime after his [Hali's] first death anniversary.

Tell me more about your pen name?

Which one?

The one you used for writing poetry?

Kaldar? Hyderabad state's own currency, Hali, had already been taken [as pen name by Altaf Husain Hali]. So, I went for the British Indian currency which was called *Kaldar*.

It is very interesting, even amusing, that for someone who has absolutely no interest in money or wealth, you choose the name of a currency as your nom de plume.

Yes [Laughing], consult your sources on what Freud has to say about it.

What are the chances of publishing your *diwan*, a collection of your poetry?

Nil. First, poetry is an expression [or statement] of the poets' feelings and emotions about the world that surrounds us. These feelings are not what I want to share with the world. I want to give those [who may be] interested an access to historical and current events, as accurately as possible, without colouring it with my feelings and emotions and let them make their own decisions. Second, very rarely I write it down, so where are you going to find my *diwan* to publish [it]?

Well, I have seen some things you have written down. While these are not your original works, they are still masterpieces, such as poetical works that you have translated from one language to another. The Urdu to French translations of Malik Ram's (1906-93) homage to Prophet Muhammad,

Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam, Iqbai's (1876-1938) Baal-i-Jibreel and the poem about the divorced woman from Bosnia, who is separated from her five children but dies after having had a glimpse of the children.

It is good, [but] my poetry is for your consumption only. That way I will create a masterpiece just for you.

Besides the- pen name, *Kaldar*, which you for writing poetry, you have used four other pen names, too, Abul Muzzafar, Nouruddin. A H Kaldar and Caldor at various times. You have written books for others to be published in their names and I wish these beneficiaries of your generosity would have at least acknowledged your contribution.

You also have original manuscripts that no one can decipher because you are using Arabic script with additional letters of your invention to write your thoughts in German! I say you are going to great lengths to remain anonymous.

I am so disappointed that, you discovered only four [pen. names]! [Laughing] I write and research to discover the truth in an attempt to please God, getting published is not of critical importance. When some people asked me to help them write a book, I did. When Muslims arrived in new lands they always used Arabic script to write the local language, so I am using the classical Islamic way of writing European languages [in Arabic, letters].

It takes about a month to learn a new language. I know that if you are having difficulty because you do not know that language, you will take some time off to learn that language and come back to the papers.

I think it is going to take some 200 years to compile and catalogue your works, as you want it to be done. It looks so complicated. I wish you would help me before all my hair turn grey. Why have you taken these measures to hide your work?

[Laughing] The deal was you will work without, asking for my help and not making these public until after my death. I have not used any particular measures to discourage you. I just did what was needed at that time.

Why do you spend such a lot of time proof-reading and correcting Muslim magazines you receive?

Muslim journalists are in short supply. All our news comes to us after being filtered through news agencies that are either ignorant or intentionally ignorant. So Muslim magazines need to be extra careful to provide accurate information.

Today you appear upset with your favourite magazine. Why is that?

Look at this picture and read what is written underneath. It is a picture of someone I know; underneath it says that this gentleman had issued a *fatwa* against taking pictures. Now that he is dead, they print his picture and his fatwa! How disrespectful! Muslim scholars really suffer at the hand of other Muslims.

You too don't like your picture to be taken or published.

Yes. I did have my picture taken in unavoidable situations such as for travel documents, but I don't like it published. Please respect that. We keep saying that everyone's ideas are to be respected, but we do it only if these ideas agree with ours. I am not imposing my ideas on other people. So respect mine and don't print my picture. [he gets very angry and upset when shown his photographs printed in a magazine or newspaper.]

I really like your picture from your Hyderabad travel documents. You look so fierce in that picture taken in 1945.

I can still look fierce, so don't play with my photographs, [the mood softens a little.]

What is your view about western style democracy?

It almost always degenerates into demo(n)cracy and anywhere up to 49% of the population is denied their rights. In comparison, an Islamic state allows this disfranchised population to have rights that they will not have in a western style democracy. Historical examples of peaceful coexistence where no one is denied their rights abound for those seek unbiased truth. [An obvious reference to Muslim political history.]

And about western feminism?

Western feminists have nothing to offer [to Muslims]. The Prophet of Islam, *Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam*, was the first 'feminist'. [The] Currently sad state of Muslims cannot be alleviated by giving one segment of the population, men or women, more power. Men, women, children, family, community, [these] all are interconnected and trying to empower one segment of the population while blaming another group for their problems will sink everyone into deeper problems and lead to the dissolution of Muslim society.

Western feminists started with good intentions, that of overcoming the limitations imposed on them by their men. But instead of seeking equity, they also want to achieve the same status their men have enjoyed. So, if these conditions were not fair when men were imposing them, then these same conditions are not fair when women are imposing them.

Exploiting one gender and treating other human beings with disrespect is not the way to achieve equity for everyone.

Tell us a little about the Khilafat Movement in India (1910-24)?

When Maulana Muhammad Ali (1878-1931) and [his elder brother] Maulana Shaukat Ali (1873-1938) launched the Khilafat Movement, it was a defining moment in my life, I was 13 or 14 then. The Khilafat

Movement was really their mother's handiwork. When westerners and others ignorant of Muslim history say Muslim women were not allowed to participate in political movements, they should read about this lady Maulana Muhammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali's mother Abadi Bano, or 'Bi Amman' as she was popularly known. She was the greatest inspiration in their lives which was made legendary by the Urdu verse meaning: Said Mom Abadi Bano to Muhammad Ali/ Lay down your life for khilafat. Sonny.]

The British knew that if the Hindu-Muslim unity displayed during these years continued they would have to leave the Indian subcontinent; so they began a devious policy to cause ethnic and religious problems that continue to this day .

Why was the State of Hyderabad unable to defend itself [against Indian aggression]?

Lack of defence capability. Hyderabad had no [proper] army to defend its borders because there was a Treaty with the British that they, who were the Paramount power, will protect the State from outside aggressors. The British went to great trouble to see that weapons and defence were not in place in Hyderabad for a long time before they left.

Therefore, attempts were made to prepare for defence. Hyderabad bought weapons from Italy, but instead of the state of the art modern equipment paid for and expected, Hyderabad received obsolete arms left over from the First World War. So our army would never see combat and fighting with weapons that did not work....

When India embargoed Hyderabad and its army moved in, their soldiers were experienced, returning after fighting in the Second World War for the British with new and modern equipment.

Although many people then and now are upset, that Hyderabad did not defend its borders; [had it done so] it would have been the slaughter of the

Hyderabadi defence [forces], causing many more deaths. Another problem was that many Hyderabadi citizens had already decided that being Indians was better than being Hyderabadis because they fell for the Hindu propaganda that they would have more access to power which they did not have in a feudal state.

I was disappointed with that attitude because our differences with the Nizam's government need not have destroyed the State of Hyderabad.

Without the ability to make their own weaponry, states cannot defend borders or protect their citizens; it is foolish to think that we can fight on imported weaponry. Muslim states continue to be dependent on others for weapons and technology and as long as this situation continues, we will face the problems we are facing.

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