

A letter to my mother on the question of choice

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Before I sat down to compose this letter, I put on a CD of songs by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. As I write these first words, he is singing *Sajna Tere Bina*, Beloved, without you. The album is called “Sweet Pain”, and throughout it Nusrat’s voice is plangent with knowledge of the bittersweet nature of life.

Mother most anxious,

I could almost taste your anxiety the last time we spoke, try as you did to conceal it. The light seemed to have gone from your eyes, and your voice was tight with fear. You are afraid for us, for our fragile future. But there is no need. Your four grandchildren will lead full and honourable lives. As I said to my wife, whose outer beauty is exceeded only by her inner grace, our children must grow up to be fully *human*, even if it is their fate merely to wait at tables.

Mother most generous,

I feel an onrush of shame each time I approach you for help – and it’s always money that I need. An adult should not have to do this. I know what you wish for me: with my degree, I could be in a prestigious position somewhere. Instead, I choose to work for a pittance, in a city that voraciously consumes what little I earn – to what end?

But I have chosen this road. Are you willing to share the bitterness that comes with my choice?

Listen. You know how, long ago, it was my most ardent desire to meet our National Laureate, white-bearded as the sages of yore. My ambition seemed to me to be as lofty as the heavens, and as unattainable. But here he is, right in front of us. See, he is drinking. Now he puts down his glass, wiping traces of milky tea from the moustache that almost conceals his lips. “A writer must choose hardship,” he says to me and my companions. He speaks slowly, but with great conviction.

Mother, at the time we were talking about writers, and about being young. Buya Hamka may disagree, but history is always apt to repeat itself. Power, we are certain, will continually shift hands. The man in power has his own party, and its members are distinguished by the ferocity of their greed and the focused intensity of their self-interest. He calls himself a Muslim, but he worships at the altar of wealth. He calls himself a Malay, and he wields race as a weapon. The voice of humanity is lost in silence, echoing unheard in a dark tunnel.

(Nusrat is singing “Alaap”. It is a sad and wistful tune, sung in a sweet and melancholic voice. The music wafts my way as a soft breeze, and the air it brings is full of sorrow.)

For as long as I can remember, the last ten nights of the month of Ramadan have been marked by the sight of my father weeping. Every mosque ever visited by him has had

its prayer rugs soaked in his tears. Lailatul Qadar, the elusive Night of Power, is supposed to be the most blessed of all nights, the hardest night to encounter. But I often feel that it must be the cruellest of all night if it never once visited my father. And I find it hard to imagine that all he has been asking for in his night vigils down the years has been rivers of wealth for himself and his family.

I am convinced that I am here because of my father's fervent prayers. In this city I find no answers, only the conviction that life is a journey that has to be embraced wholeheartedly.

Mother most bewildered,

From now on, little by little, we will begin to banish the bewilderment that causes you so much anxiety. In the following letters I will tell you – God willing, with greater clarity of thought - the reasons I need to be here. I will tell of the concerns that we laid out, that evening, on the table of that roadside stall, when we saw division and sectarianism spreading far and wide, when we saw through the lies of those who seize power and lord it over others, when we witnessed the mad grasping for material goods that strangles the life out of the human race.

Mother,

This is our Zaman Edan, the age of madness. It is not unlike Indonesian Zaman Edan, in 1960s, when artists had to follow the path of Soekarnoism, and be pressed into line if they showed a tendency to stray. Sitting in that café, drunk on talk and thought, we went further: we concluded that we are living in Kalabendu, the Apocalyptic age described by the great Javanese poet, Ranggawarsita. It is an age where, in the words of Auden, things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

An exaggeration? Consider the fact that our country has a National Cultural Policy, the basic principles of which lay down the following: the National Culture has to be founded on the indigenous culture; elements from other cultures that are considered appropriate and suitable *will* be incorporated into the National Culture; and Islam is the most important component of the National Culture. Furthermore, there is a caveat: “*appropriate and suitable*, as mentioned in the second principle, must be understood in the context of the first and third principles, and NOT based on other considerations.”

Have you ever heard this story, a true one, from a country out there in the Near East?

Once upon a time, not so long ago, lived Abdul Hamid Kishk, a blind religious scholar famed throughout Egypt. He never ceased to give lectures and make public pronouncements, and recordings of his speeches and writings are popular and widespread even to the present day. In one of his lectures, Abdul Hamid Kishk spoke of the reward awaiting Muslim men in paradise, how they would enjoy eternal erections while in the company of young men adorned with earrings and necklaces: an eternity of blissful pederasty.

Tales of the afterlife have always gripped the attention of those of us who frequent mosques. The difference in this case, however, is that in Egypt, during the lifetime of

Abdul Hamid Kishk, his account of paradise so gripped the popular imagination that the academics of the Al-Azhar University, the most celebrated seat of Islamic learning, felt that they had to issue a response. The penises of the faithful Muslim men would not, they decreed, be perpetually erect, but only for protracted periods.

A prominent Egyptian thinker and writer, Farag Foda, mocked what passed for intellectual discourse in the Islamic academic milieu. In May 1992, Farag wrote in an article: “Is this what concerns Muslims at the end of the 20th century? The world around us is busy with the conquest of space, genetic engineering and the wonders of the computer, while Muslim scholars are worried about sex in paradise.”

Mother, listen to the aftermath...

A fortnight after publishing that article, on 8 June 1992, Farag Foda was shot dead outside his office in Cairo, killed by two Egyptian members of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya.

This is Kalabendu, Mother,

The voices of madness are in the ascendant, and their message of hatred finds a response among the multitudes. The madness marches on through our time, and its ferocity is undiminished. In 1934, Muhammad Asad made the claim that modern Europe was born out of the spirit of the Crusades, and the defence of the new concept of Christendom, synonymous with Western Civilisation, has ever since then been the justification for Europe's hostility towards Islam. Asad's ideas found fertile ground in the Islamic movements in Malaysia in the 1970s, and were propagated with the conviction that “the conflict in question has endured unabated.” We still labour under these ancient prejudices. They continue to burden us, because it is Europe now that responds with unfounded sympathy, with naïve calls for tolerance. It was the Europeans who exhibited the greatest bias in favour of Muslims during the controversy surrounding the cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten*. Such European naïveté may be summed up in the words of the Pakistani-born writer Mohamed Rasoel.

In Amsterdam in 1992 Rasoel lambasted the Dutch public and the state attorney who was instrumental in the banning of a book he wrote that was critical of Muslims: “I don't blame this state attorney, he is a nice man but rather dumb and naïve like most Dutchmen...Muslims are allowed to shout: kill Rushdie...When Muslims say on TV that all Dutch women are whores, it is allowed...”

Mother, I am afraid that things will continue to get worse...

if we flee to the peace of the countryside, to cultivate our own gardens, passively witnessing the prevailing spirit of abject surrender. Like the head of a pigeon, surrender tilts its head every now and then, every which way, even here in the United States, from where I write this letter. The Nike sports company once recalled 38,000 pairs of sneakers merely because Muslims alleged that the flame design on the shoes resembled the Arabic word for God. Not content with this, Nike issued an apology, organised “sensitivity training” regarding Islam for their employees, and donated USD50,000 to Islamic schools in the United States.

This attitude of surrender is extreme and demeaning. It is impossible for us to remain silent and yet call ourselves human. There is no reason why Muslims should be treated with kid gloves. An attitude of firmness, honesty and commonsense must be shown by anyone who is confronted by Muslims.

Mother,

At this point, I begin to fret: perhaps I am only adding to your bewilderment. Perhaps I also need to clarify further why we keep pushing the boundaries. Life is a long journey – and along the way there are colourful blooms, and there are also thickets of thorns, there are fragrant smells, and noxious fumes, there is light, and shadow – and we undertake that journey with great cheer and courage of heart.

I recall this because it happened so recently: you grumbled about my DVD collection, the money for which could better have been spent on food, you said. Know this, Mother: the stories recounted in moving pictures on a screen energise me, giving me more strength than any food could. This is the energy that can overflow as tears, when I hear Mohamed Mounir in Youssef Chahine's "Le Destin" singing, "*alli soutak, 'alli soutak bil ghuna, lissah aghani mumkinah, mumkinah*". "Raise your voice in song, songs are still allowed, still allowed." Before the Nimrod's furnace, that is what I shall do, and more, I will dance, Mother, I will dance.