

The Secular Side of Islam: a Case Study of Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet*

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Abstract

The present study discusses the secular side of Islamic civilization in Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet*. Against the misrepresentation of Islam in the western discourse, Ali's *Islam Quintet* depicts the past history of Muslims that highlights the secular, tolerant, pluralistic and intellectual side of the Islamic civilization. The study is qualitative in nature. The technique of content analysis was used to analyse the texts of three novels – *Shadows of the pomegranate tree*, *The Book of Saladin*, *A Sultan in Palermo* – of *Islam Quintet* to argue that the author deconstructs the western notions about Islam and retells the history from other's perspective. The analysis of the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* demonstrates that the Muslims of Banu Hudayl lived secular lives and their actions and decisions were determined by material and economic motives. Furthermore, the study highlights the intellectual, rational, tolerant and secular side of some significant historical and fictional characters in "the Book of Saladin" and "a Sultan in Palermo".

Keywords: Christian Europe, Islamic civilization, *Islam Quintet*, Orientalism, Secular aspect

1. Introduction to the *Islam Quintet*

Tariq Ali is an eminent Britain-based Pakistani writer of fiction and non-fiction. A proclaimed atheist, he is a left-wing political activist and harsh critic of US' hegemonic and imperialistic policies. His *Islam Quintet* is a series of five historical novels – *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, *the Book of Saladin*, *the Stone Woman*, *a Sultan in Palermo*, and, *Night of the Golden Butterfly*. It reconstructs the past history of the Muslims, their quest for learning, religious tolerance, and their relationship with the West. The novels of the *Quintet* are set in different locales and times in history that exhibit the different phases of Islamic civilization in Europe and their relationship/clash with the Christian Europe. The *Islam Quintet* besides retelling the history of the Muslims also attempts to find out answer to the important question why Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, has not been through the process of reformation. It also highlights the Muslims' contribution to the European Renaissance.

The first novel of the *Quintet*, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (2000), set in the late 15th century Moorish Spain, starts with the infamous bonfire of the books belonging to the Muslims. The books included on mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, hand-crafted copies of Quran on the orders of the Archbishop, Ximenes de Cisneros as an attempt to annihilate the rich culture and heritage of the Muslims. The novel depicts that after having reconquered Spain from the Muslims, Queen Isabella with the help of Church persecutes the Muslims and Jews to consolidate her monarchy. The rich culture of knowledge, tolerance and multiculturalism is not allowed to continue by the Queen. "The novel manages to symbolise both the unique contribution of Arab culture and learning to Europe as well as the destruction of that learning at the hands of "civilised" Christendom" (Ahmed 2006). The Muslims, being a defeated people, are faced with the very issue of survival in the peninsula. Some of them prefer to convert to Christianity to save their lives, estates and properties rather than to fight or migrate. The Muslims, as opposed to their enemies, have been portrayed as secular people who are more concerned with their safety and well-being of their families, lands, businesses, and homes. Thus their concerns are material than spiritual ones.

The Book of Saladin (2000) is set in late 12th century, during the reign of Kurdish leader Saladin, who was the sultan of Egypt and Syria. Saladin succeeded in uniting the politically divided Arabs against the Christian crusades and reclaimed Jerusalem from crusaders. The novel portrays the secular culture of Saladin's court and the tolerant and unorthodox nature of Saladin and the Muslims of the time. The novel also highlights the political and material aspects of Saladin's *Jihad*. The story of Saladin is narrated by a court-appointed scribe, Ibn Yaqub, who is a Jew.

The narrative of *A Sultan in Palermo* (2005) depicts a multiethnic and multicultural society in 12th century Sicily, where the Christian king Roger II (called Sultan Rujari) is in love with the rich and diverse culture of his Muslim subjects. The central character of the novel is Muhammad al-Idrisi, a Muslim cartographer, a geographer and a man of learning, who enjoys a prestigious social and political position at the Christian court as well as among his fellow Muslims. At the court, he is envied by the mistrustful and greedy Christian priests who eye the power and wealth after the death of old and ailing king. The novel presents a world of science, philosophy and rational thought which is not allowed to exist by the orthodox Christian priests and the power-hungry Church. Political intrigues are intertwined with the sexual intrigues of the powerful female characters in the story that ends in a tragedy.

2. Historical and Theoretical Background

The relationship between the Muslims and the Christian west has been a long history of confrontation, armed conflicts, military alliances along religious lines, peaceful cultural exchange and infrequent cooperation and coexistence (Nawwab: 2001). West's persistent hostility dates back to the very days of Islam. The remarkable rise and spread of Islam in the 7th century A.D. with its military and political repercussions made Christian Europe very apprehensive. Within a century, Islam entrenched in major parts of Asia, Africa and was knocking at the very doors of the Europe (Kidwai: 2001). In the beginning the West responded to the Islamic threat as "a transient heresy" hoping that like many other heresies of the past it could be combated, suppressed or allowed to die a natural death and "... the Muslims were cast in the role of enemy, as a fierce, irrational people given to violence and lust" (ibid: 52). In the 11th century, the Christian Europe responded to Islam militarily by launching a series of Crusades against the Muslims to check their arch rival's progress and reclaim their lost territories; it was also the first real face to face contact between Europe and the Islamic world. With time, the Christian west realized that Islam was not just one more Christian heresy but a successful, rival, world religion. The idea of co-existence was abandoned and a fiercer and stronger theological and intellectual response was developed. Thus, "Islam was portrayed as a religion of violence, idolatry, licentiousness.... The prophet was depicted as a cunning politician, a sexual libertine, an imposter, a hatemonger, and the Anti-Christ. The painful effects of these calumnies can be witnessed to this day" (Nawwab: 2001: 12). This brings us to the issue of (mis)representation of Islam and the Muslims by the west, in Said's terms, the Orientalism. In Orientalism, Said (2001) challenges the western discourse about East as prejudiced, biased and essentialist. Said argues that through the science of Orientalism the artificial binary of east and west was created to provide an intellectual justification to the European colonization. The Europe used Orientalism to define itself as civilized and superior as opposed the east, presented as exotic, primitive and uncivilized.

The misrepresentation of Islam and the Muslims continues to this day. Islam is presented as a religion of violence and its followers are associated with extremism, terrorism and fundamentalism. This phenomenon has seen a surge in the modern times especially after the September 11 attacks on the twin towers in the US allegedly by *al-Qaeda*. Edward Said's (1997) *Covering Islam* tells about how the world views Islam as a religion. Said postulates that if knowledge is power then the ability to control knowledge is an even greater power. He refers to the media's power to control and filter information; thus its ability to hide and manipulate truth and create (mis)perceptions and opinions. He claims that the western media has determined very selectively what Westerners should and should not know about Islam and the Muslim world. Islam is portrayed as oppressive, outmoded, anti-intellectualist, extremist, backward, the cause of worldwide conflict and danger.

Similarly, Suleiman (1999) concludes: "There have been many scholarly studies of the American press and its coverage of the Middle East. Almost unanimously, these studies alone show that there is press bias against Arabs/Muslims and Arabs are routinely portrayed in a negative light on television and in movies. Often, they are presented as unreasonable, if not stupid, primitive, sex crazed, aggressive and violent. The women are seen as uneducated, oppressed and docile."

Tariq Ali in one of his interviews talks about the negative image of Islam in the west as "one of bearded terrorists" and "as an evil religion" (Cited in Ahmed 2006). "These attacks on Muslims perpetuate the myth that Islamic culture is backward and its politics despotic" (Ahmed 2006). It was the result of one such prejudiced remark against the Arabs that intrigued Ali to respond to it. In his interview with Ahmed (2006) Ali shares that in 1991 during the first Gulf War, when he heard some professor saying on TV that "Arabs are a people without political culture", it angered him as he instinctively knew that it was not true. As he felt compelled to challenge these western notions, *Islam Quintet* was the result. Initially, it wasn't the design of the author to write a complete series. But, when Edward Said read the first novel of the series, he liked it and encouraged the author to write the complete series: "Don't stop now. Tell the whole bloody story" (Ali: 2010).

Ali's *Islam Quintet* is an attempt to reconstruct and re-tell the history from other's perspective. It portrays the other side of the Muslims, their rich culture of learning and scholarship, religious tolerance and multi-culturalism at a time when the Christian west was sunk in ignorance and fundamentalism. The most striking feature of *Islam Quintet* is a world of plurality, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and the quest for knowledge (Ahmed 2006). Ali also deconstructs Huntington's myth of 'clash of civilizations' (1997) by highlighting the political nature of Islam that is diverse and not monolithic; and also by showing the political and economic side of the relationship/clash between the Islamic and Christian civilizations.

2.1. Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature. It is an explanatory analysis of the three novels of Ali's *Islam Quintet*. The technique of Textual analysis was used to analyse and interpret the texts to answer the question that how Ali represents the secular and rational side of the Muslims against the western notions regarding Islam and the Muslims. The first part of the discussion analyses *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* for the representation of the Muslims and their lives in secular and material terms. The second part analyses some major characters from all the three novels for the intellectual, rational, secular and tolerant side of their personality.

3. Analysis

Ali's *Islam Quintet* retells and reconstructs the history of Islam to deconstruct the Western notions about Islam and the Muslims. The *Islam Quintet* takes us to different periods of history to show us the Islamic civilization which is rational, secular, progressive and tolerant whereas, its counterpart, the Christian Europe of the middle ages is represented by fundamentalism as exhibited in its crusading spirit.

3.1. Secular Aspect in Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree

The *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* takes the readers into the 15th century Moorish Spain, where the Islamic civilization, that is on the verge of its annihilation at the hands of its Christian forces of queen Isabella, has the characteristics of rationalism, secularism and tolerance for which the today's West is so proud of. Ali shows that the Muslims were not only secular but among them were also some people who were highly rationalistic in their approach towards religion. "*The attempt to reconcile reason and divine truth became an Andalusian speciality. . .*" (Ali 2003: 37).

Among Muslim characters in the novel, we do not find a single character that should be called a practising Muslim, leave alone a fundamentalist. Of course, the old lady Ama is an exception who is ritualistic. The Muslims shown in the novel are secular, unorthodox, educated and tolerant Muslims who are ready to coexist with their new rulers provided they are ensured the safety of their lives, properties and faith. They are rather liberal and secular Muslims for whom their lives and lands are the first priorities and religion comes after these two. They are not religious people as far as their life-style is concerned. They are very lax in the matters of sex and morality. Religion, for them, is more associated with culture and language – the Andalusian culture of learning, reasoning and Arabic language – than the true spirit of Islam.

Zubayda, Umar's wife, is a secular lady. She complains to her husband: "*Nobody knows better than you that I am not a religious person. . . She [Ama] tells your Yazid that his mother is a blasphemer, even though I keep up pretence. I fast during Ramadan*" (Ali 2000: 20). Umar's response to her is revealing for the audience: "*But we all know that you fast and pray to preserve your figure.*" Zubayda is such a secular lady that the old servant, Ama, tells Yazid that his mother is a blasphemer. Zubayda herself admits that she, being the lady of the house, keeps pretences before her children and the servants. Her husband, Umar, knows quite well that his wife bows before *Makkah* and keeps fast not to submit her will to Allah. Although, *Namaz* (the daily five obligatory prayers) and fasting are the two fundamental tenets of Islam but she practises these two to preserve her figure. It signifies that for the Muslims of Banu Hudayl, religion had become a matter of appearances and rituals.

Talking about Azan (the call for prayer) and prayer, the narrator tells us that the villagers are used to these "*noises*" (Azan) and "*not all respond to the call*". In Umar's house, it is Ama alone who offers the five obligatory prayers. Umar's family lives a typical aristocratic life. They are extravagant in their life-style. Their lunches and dinners are lavish. They play chess. From the large number of their servants to their private baths, everything speaks for their luxurious life-style. They are liberal in the matters of sex. Umar's younger daughter Hind falls into a physical relationship with Ibn Daud before marriage, which is even in the knowledge of her mother. The young knight Zuhayr, who wants to fight against the Christian persecutors to save his family and faith, forces the house-maids and village girls to his will. Once when Zuhayr absentees himself from a discussion that takes place at his house, in which Miguel and others debate on the critical times which the Muslims find themselves in, Umar shows his anger at his elder son's indiscipline. He knows that his brave knight must be "*busy on some hillside impregnating a wretched maid-servant*". Zahra, Miguel's sister and Umar's aunt, who was in love with *al-Zindiq* in her youth, had developed a physical relationship with her lover. All these instances confirm that the Muslims in the Moorish Spain were very liberal in the matters of sex.

The first priority of the Muslim Moors is to survive best in the Peninsula. Therefore, the religion has become their third priority – life and lands being at the first and second place. There are many Muslims who have either converted for political and material reasons or are ready to convert. Umar's uncle Miguel is one such convert. He is the Bishop of *Qurtuba* (Cordova) and enjoys a life of status and privilege. His decision to convert was purely a political matter: "*My decision was determined by politics, not religion*" (ibid. 85). He remains a Muslim at heart and "*bow[s] before Mecca every Friday*". He defends his decision to convert arguing that otherwise his family would have been destroyed: "*In primitive times one must learn to be primitive*" (ibid. 85). He, repeatedly, tries to convince Umar and his family to convert to ensure the safety of their lives, the family lands and property.

The case of Ibn Hisham is not different either. Ibn Hisham is Umar's cousin and friend, a wealthy merchant who lives in *Gharnata* (Granada). He also converts solely for material reasons. In Miguel's words: "*For him it is his business, his trade, his family.*" He further says: "*His decision to become a Christian was on the same level as the decision he had taken thirty years ago to put all his gold into importing brocades from Samarkand. Within a year he had trebled his wealth*" (ibid. 86). In Ibn Hisham's own words: "*I want you to know that my reasons have nothing to do with religion.*" "*It was for family. For their future*" (ibid. 87-8). It is clear from the cases of Miguel and Ibn Hisham that they, despite being from the noble family of Ibn Farid, convert to Christianity not only to safeguard their lives and properties but also to improve their social standing

and to prosper in terms of business and money. They do not feel any obligation to fight for their faith. To Ibn Hisham, what concerns most is not the abstract doctrines of his faith but his material existence. Even Umar considers the option of conversion seriously as he is convinced that it is just a matter of appearances but, he can't, because there is something in him that rebels against such an idea. Miguel's half-sister Zahra, who has been in a *Maristan* in *Gharnata* for thirty years, pretends to be a Christian when forced conversions start in the *Maristan*. It saves her life and she is escorted to Umar's house because she is the daughter of the great Muslim knight Ibn Farid. Umar's chief steward Ubaydallah, who has made a great deal of money and lands by manipulating his master's resources, also decides to convert as this would ensure the safety of his ill-gotten money. Talking about the tales of seizing the properties of the Muslims in *Gharnata* and the approach of the people of *Banu Hudayl* towards it, the narrator says:

What had left a very deep imprint was the detailed description of how land and estates and property in several towns had been seized by the Catholic Church and the Crown. It was this that the villagers feared more than anything else. They did not want to be driven off the lands which they and their ancestors before them had cultivated for centuries. If the only way to save their homes was to convert, then many would undergo that ordeal in order to survive. First among them would be the family steward, Ubaydallah, whose only gods were security and wealth (ibid. 48).

It is significant to analyse that what the villagers fear most is how the Church and the queen captured the lands and properties of the Muslims. Their prime concern is neither their religious and cultural annihilation, nor their political subjugation. Rather, it is their economic oppression that they fear the most. And they are also ready to undergo the 'ordeal' of conversion to save their homes, lands and properties.

It is clear from the above discussion that the Muslims shown in the novel are very worldly and pragmatic people. They are secular people who live carefree, lavish lives. This is also their prime concern. They neither want to fight for their faith nor are they ready to leave their lands and homes. They want to continue with their materialistic lives even at the cost of their religion, Islam

3.2. The People in the *Islam Quintet*

The *Islam Quintet* presents a diverse range of characters – some of them are real characters from history whereas some are fictitious – ranging from legendary ruler Saladin, scholarly Idrisi, assertive and powerful Jamila to heretics like *al-Zindiq*. The common thread that runs through all the characters is that they represent the rich and dynamic culture of the Islamic civilization of the pre-modern times. Before we discuss some of these in detail it must be noted that none of the major Muslim characters in the *Islam Quintet* is either fundamentalist or orthodox.

a) Muhammad al-Idrisi

Muhammad al-Idrisi is the central Muslim character in *A Sultan in Palermo*. He is fifty eight, of medium height with delicate features and a soft, fair skin. He is a master geographer and physician and is working on two books throughout the novel – one is named as *The Universal Geography* and the other on the medicine. He is respected and honoured at the Sultan's court for his learning and scholarship. He is liked by the King and has a high social and political standing both at the court as well as among the Muslims. He did not leave the island like other Muslim thinkers and scholars to establish a life in *Ifriqiya* or Baghdad where the Caliph patronised poets and the thinkers. The reason being, the freedom and the access provided to him at the palace library since he was a young man of twenty seven. He is a close friend of Sultan Rujari. Their friendship had been the result of a chance encounter in their youth at the palace library when al-Idrisi had visited it to see the newly-found manuscript of the Arabic translation of a Homer's book. After the Sultan Rujari patronised Idrisi's scholarship, he had spent months in the Sultan's library reading the rare manuscripts in the search of the truth. So much so, that the place eunuchs often referred to him as *Abu Kitab*, the father of the book. Later, as a trusted confidant of the Sultan, his status was enhanced to *Amir al-Kitab*.

The character of Idrisi has been delineated in the novel as a scholar who is totally engrossed in his academic pursuits. He sacrifices his family life for his dedication towards his work. He is an unconventional person. Some of his friends even doubt his allegiance to his faith – Islam. The first chapter of the novel narrates that when, after a long voyage for the mapping of the entire island, his boat is about to reach back the coast of Palermo, his mind is totally absorbed in one question – what would be the first sentence of his book. He has completed his book except for the first sentence. He is indecisive about it. If he remains faithful to the old tradition then he would have to start his book by praising the generosity of Allah, then the Prophet (PBUH) and then his patron the Sultan and so on. But, his intellect is against the idea of following what he calls the "eternal repetition". But, if he follows his intellect he would break with the old style. In that case, he would have to suffer the inevitable abuse that would follow. Many of his acquaintances would regard it as the confirmation of their suspicions that he had secretly abandoned the faith and sold himself to the Christian Sultan. In the state of turmoil and indecision, on one occasion, his mind even comes with a heretic thought – he would surprise all of them to by starting in the name of Satan, who challenged, defied and was punished. Finally, he makes a compromise. He, except for his personal copy, gives the book a traditional start. The opening sentence for his personal copy goes like this: *The earth is round like a sphere, and the waters adhere to it and are maintained on*

it through natural equilibrium which suffers no variation. The opening sentence is quite secular based on reason rather than Idrisi's allegiance to faith. It exposes Idrisi's secular character as a man who is thoroughly engaged in his intellectual pursuits.

There is another incident in the novel that tells us further about the secular character of Idrisi. He questions Quran on the basis of his knowledge of astronomy. Once his closest friend Ibn Hamid, with sad heart had looked at the sky and muttered, "*O poetry of the stars*". Idrisi had responded in an angry tone. He subjected him to a lecture on astronomy and asked if he had noted how each night a movement was repeated. If what he thought was true then Quran was mistaken. Ibn Hamid became fearful that his friend might be charged with blasphemy and advised him to leave such questions.

The above incident, the fact that Idrisi maps the entire island, the titles of *Abu Kitab* and *Amir al-Kitab*, all these things exhibit the level of the scholarship and learning that Idrisi had. His scholarship was not limited to a single subject or field. He enjoyed expertise in geography, cartography, astronomy, medicine, literature and so on. Idrisi's character is symbolical of learning and rational thought which was a peculiarity of the Islamic civilization in the medieval times. Ali also refers to those Muslim scholars who had left for Baghdad or Africa where they were '*patornised*' by the caliph. The mention of newly-found Arabic translation of Homer's book is a reference to the important role that the Muslims played in bringing the European renaissance. Thus, the point that the author tries to make is clear: the Muslims of the time had a remarkable culture of learning and rational thought and they also contributed to the European renaissance.

Idrisi's private life too is characterised by unorthodoxy and physical pleasure. Idrisi enjoys physical relations with his beloved Maya and her half-sister Bilkis. He has a love child from Maya and another from Bilkis, which is in fact the result of a plot of two sisters to extract his seed for, the otherwise married but childless, Bilkis. Idrisi on one occasion tells Bilkis that he had a serving woman at the court that fulfilled all her needs. Above instances prove Idrisi to be a man of lax morals as far as his private life is concerned. He keeps illegitimate relationships with more than one woman that is clearly against the basic teachings of his faith. But, it is because of the intellectual and secular aspect of his personality that he does not have problems in leading a life of intellectual satisfaction and physical pleasure.

b) Salah al-Din (*Saladin*)

Tariq Ali in *The Book of Saladin* portrays Saladin as a man, who from an ordinary careless youth – thanks to the circumstances – transforms into a competent commander and a ruler of commitment and strong will. Saladin's character has been delineated in very secular terms. He is not a very religious person in his approach. He is a practical Muslim who, at the same time, is unorthodox and secular in his approach. He believes that "*to dream and to know is better than to pray and be ignorant*" (ibid. 30). He does not attribute his achievements to Allah almighty; rather, he holds the Marxist belief that the fate and the circumstances had made him a great man: "*Fate and history conspired to make me what I am today*" (ibid. 31). On another occasion he expresses the same belief: "*All I am saying is that we are all creatures of our fate, and our lives are determined by the times in which we exist. Our biographies are determined by circumstance*" (ibid. 54).

Besides his person, his actions also speak about his unorthodox and secular ideals. His judgment to spare the life of beautiful Halima, who had committed adultery, is not just unorthodox but totally against the teachings of *Al-Quran*. Allah has clearly mentioned in the Quran that the adultery is to be punished by the stoning to death. But the Sultan, defying Allah's orders, spares Halima's life; and she becomes a beautiful addition to his already crowded *harem* to satisfy his royal desires. The Sultan, in his youth indulged in the pleasures of the body and, when deserted in love, resorted to wine and began harbouring heretical ideas. Shadhi gives Ibn Yakub the account of the Sultan's first carnal knowledge: when the Sultan was just a boy and his beloved twice his age. Shadhi tells that, "*they were shameless*" and "*were behaving like animals*" (ibid. 74). Later on, the Sultan himself narrates to his Scribe that when, one day, he was deserted by his ten-years-older-than-him beloved, he went to a tavern and drank wine: "*We began to drink the wine which is forbidden by our Holy Book*" (ibid. 93). Then his uncle Shirkuh, to divert the young boy from his idle thoughts, took him on his first battle to Cairo. He was reluctant and disliked the thought of combat. He was reluctant to go for a battle because he had started reciting and composing poetry. He, as this was common in those days, would indulge in heretical thoughts.

The fact was that I had grown accustomed to meeting a group of friends on most evenings, and we would think heretical thoughts, and recite and discuss poetry. On some nights I would go to a secret assignment near the public baths, to exchange glances and sometimes a little more with a young woman. . . (ibid. 96).

The young Salah al-Din of sixteen had also fallen in love with a beautiful singing girl, Zubayda, whom he wanted to marry. He had even started composing couplets in the praise of her beauty. But, since she was his father's keep, she could not be married to him. He was broken-hearted and married late. But, once, the children began to arrive, his sexual powers also increased immensely. In Shadhi's words: "*He took one concubine after another, and produced more sons than his father and uncle put together*" (ibid. 321). The Sultan, like most of

the Muslim rulers, had a large *harem* with eighty concubines, besides his two wives and the recently-taken Halima, to meet his carnal desires.

Besides Saladin's person and his private life, his *Jihad* wasn't purely a religious phenomenon. It had significant political and material dimensions too. Ali (2003) while analyzing the history of Islamic civilization asserts that "*contrary to common belief the concept of Jihad as 'holy war' had a limited pedigree*". After the early victories of Islam, the slogan of Jihad, as a mobilising force, had been dropped. It was the barbaric zealotry of the crusading Christians that forced Saladin in uniting the divided Muslims in the name of Jihad. Ali Quotes Saladin exhorting his soldiers: "*Regard the Franj. Behold with what obstinacy they fight for their religion, while we, the Muslims, show no enthusiasm for waging holy war*" (Ali 2003: 41-42). *The Book of Saladin* also exhibits how the concepts of Jihad and Crusade were exploited in the fight for Jerusalem.

A critical look at *Salah al-Din's* jihad shows that *Salah al-Din*, despite the fact that he wanted to drive the Franks out of Middle East, was not a religious fanatic like Antonio or Reynald of Chatillon: "*Salah al-Din was not a vindictive or cruel man*" (ibid. 228). He believed in the tolerance and peaceful coexistence with the believers of other faiths. The great scholar *Imad al-Din* enlightens Ibn Yakub about *Salah al-Din's* approach to Jihad in these words: "*There were some hot-headed fools for whom the Jihad meant a state of permanent war with the Franj, but Salah al-Din was never sympathetic to such a view*" (ibid. 231). The reasons why he wanted to drive the Franks out were simple: The presence of the belligerent, greedy and fanatic crusaders, in the region, was a constant threat for the whole region. Saladin fully realised that a stable piece could not be established as long as the crusaders kept their presence in the region. The attacks on the *Hajj* caravans by the people like Reynald only strengthened and reaffirmed his faith in the righteousness of his task. He revived the dead spirit of Jihad among the Muslims for accomplishing his task. In this way, he was not only able to unite the politically divided Muslims but he was also able to defeat the Franks and reclaim Jerusalem from them. Armstrong (2001) views *Salah al-Din's* Jihad in the following perspective: "*Saladin made very successful use of propaganda, in which the Jihad was presented as essential to Muslim integrity, with all the zeal of Nur al-Din*" (P. 240).

Salah al-Din never claimed that the holy city of Jerusalem belonged only to the Muslims. As we know that after the surrender of Jerusalem to *Salah al-Din*, no civilian Christians were killed. And the Christians and Jews were allowed to live in Jerusalem, and to visit and pray in their holy places of worship. So, the reasons behind *Salah al-Din's* Jihad were neither to kill nor convert the non-Muslims, nor to spread Islam, nor to conquer new territories for the Muslim empire. But, these were the unity and the consolidation of Muslim empire, the political stability of the Muslims, peace in the Middle East, security of the natives and the pilgrims and the reclamation of what had belonged to the Muslims for almost five centuries. Thus, the reasons were political and not the religious.

c) Jamila

Jamila, a woman of unusual beauty and intellect, is Saladin's second wife. A well-educated lady and the "*daughter of an enlightened Sultan*" she is not only liberal and secular in her ideals but she has also read and shares some of the '*heretical*' beliefs of the rationalists like *Ibn Rushd* and *Ibn Hazm* and the likes. She talks of these rationalists with her approval and reverence. She goes as far as to question the very basic tenets of Islam. She asks *Ibn Yakub*: "*Do you think there is a life after death. Ibn Yakub?*" (ibid. 151). She declines *Ibn Yakub's* advice for caution by telling him that: "*In my father's court, O learned scribe, I discussed questions of life and death without any restriction. . . .Our great poet Abu Ala al-Maari questioned everything including the Koran.*" (ibid. 151). She questions revelation as a divine thing and takes it as a type of wisdom: "*Divine revelation in all our great Books is one type of wisdom*" (ibid. 151). She prefers reason over blind faith because she has been taught the other type of wisdom – reason – by her tutor. Jamila's practical life is as unorthodox as her beliefs and ideals. She develops a homosexual relationship with Halima in the *harem*. She enjoys the anti-Islamic and unnatural relationship very much. When, after the birth of her son, Halima finishes off the relationship, Jamila feels desperately deserted and wants to punish her. Through Jamila's character, Ali gives a voice to his own ideology. Ali, being a "self-proclaimed atheist" does not believe in the orthodoxy of religion. Thus, Jamila's questioning the concept of revelation, her disbelief in the life after death, her rejection of the blind faith, and her love for the rationalists like *Ibn Rushd* is expressive of the author's socialist ideology. Thus, Jamila has been portrayed as a very powerful, liberated and enlightened Muslim woman against the western stereotypes of weak and oppressed Muslim women in the *harem*.

d) The Trusted One (Al-Farid)

The trusted One is a man of unorthodox and socialist views who is as much critical of the Muslim ruling elite for their exploitation of the poor as much as of the tyrannical and greedy Barons who persecute the Muslims. He is "*preaching rebellion*" against the Barons and Lombards at a critical time when the Muslims are living in the trying times. After the execution of Philip, he leads his first organised attack on the Lombards in a small village near Noto. There were about "*three hundred well-armed Lombard barbarians*" who lived in a castle on the estate of Bishop John. These Lombards would steal the crops of the peasants and harass their women regularly, as they had nothing else to do. As a result of his successful attack, the people of the village do not only get rid of the cruel Lombards but they, also, recover their lands.

The most significant thing is that the Trusted One distributes all the lands among the villagers equally, including the monk and few Christian families who had lived in harmony with the Muslims for two hundred years. On this occasion, he makes a wonderful speech in which he talks against the exploitation of the poor by the rich *Amirs* and *Sultans*; and how the poor fought against them in the history. He preaches political, social and economic equality among the villagers. Preaching a socialist way of life, the Trusted One says:

If one of you decides to become the lord of the land and the rest of you accept, then you will not last long. If you work together, share your food, look after each other, as many of our people did in the early days, then your community might survive. A way of life that protects the interests of all is a way of life people will die for. What is taught from the lips of those who use laws and customs to defend property that they have stolen in the first place or have inherited from those who stole it is worthless. Be bold. Forget them (ibid. 180).

From the beliefs he holds and the ideas he preaches, the Trusted One is more of a Marxist and socialist than a religious preacher. This is also obvious that he is the mouth-piece of Tariq Ali himself. The author, himself being a leftist, expresses his views about religion, history, political and economic system, and the causes of Muslims' downfall through this character. The Trusted One, like Ali, holds unorthodox and unconventional views about institution of religion and Islam. He believes that man himself is the maker of his destiny: "*I am not one of those who believe that Allah decides all our actions on earth. If that were so, he would be a monster*" (ibid.). He shares the beliefs of people like Ibn Rushd and questions the orthodox dogmas of religion.

It is important to note that the Trusted One is quite an un-orthodox character in the matters of religion. His reasons for a rebellion are based on reason and practical sense. He does not preach rebellion to oust the infidels from a land of the pure; nor does he lure the Muslims through the promises of the paradise and the *hoors*. He preaches it simply for the worldly reasons which make sense to all. He only wants to save the lives, the lands and the properties of the Believers. And, he wants to rid the Muslims of the atrocities of the Lombards and the Barons. As opposed to the religious fanatic Antonio, the Trusted One is a highly secular figure. His Secularism can be judged from the fact that he has no grudges against the Christian King, Rujari. He, rather, wishes that "*may Allah send him to heaven for he has not been cruel to the Believers*" (ibid. 109). It is obvious that had it not been the cruel Lombards and the greedy Barons, the Muslims would happily continue to coexist with the followers of the Christ and Moses under the Christian rule. It is only when their very existence is threatened that they resort to fight.

e) *Al-Zindiq* (Ibn Basit)

The character of the Trusted One makes a good comparison with Ibn Basit better known as *al-Zindiq*, (free thinker or heretic) in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*. Like the Trusted One, *al-Zindiq* is also a dejected lover. *Al-Zindiq* is a sceptic who lives in a cave outside the village of *al-Hudayl*. He is a poet, a free-thinker and a writer. Like the Trusted One, he has a remarkable knowledge of the past history of the Muslims. Being a rationalist and sceptic, he holds unorthodox views about Islam – that sometimes go to the level of blasphemy. He often quotes the blasphemous poet *al-Ma'ari* and the rationalist *Ibn Rushd*. He is critical of the Muslim rulers of the past as well as present, and the conservative religious scholars who monopolised Islam. He is of the view that the Muslims underestimated their capacity for self-destruction. The fight for power among the Muslim *Amirs* / rulers, Arabs' racial pride, their failure to assimilate with the locals, and their inability to evolve a successful political system were the reasons of their decline. He disapproves any rebellion against the Christian forces in *Gharnata*, as it is already too late for the Muslims and thus is bound to fail. But, it is interesting to note that he, in the end of the novel, like other people of *al-Hudayl* lays his life fighting against the Christian army. Like the Trusted One in *A Sultan in Palermo*, *al-Zindiq* is the mouthpiece of the author in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* who projects the author's ideology on the issues like religion, history and the downfall of the Muslims.

f) Ibn Rushd and the Likes: the Voices of Dissent

The *Islam Quintet* frequently refers to a number of rationalist poets, philosophers and thinkers of mediaeval Islam such as Ibn-Rushd, Ibn-Hazm, Abu al-Ma'ari, Abu Nuwas etc, who were skeptical of many religious beliefs and questioned orthodox religion. They went as far as to doubt *al-Quran* as the word of God and questioned the divinity of revelation. The characters like *al-Zindiq*, the trusted one and Jamila are impressed and influenced by them, quote them and seem to practice their ideology. Historically, these people being a voice of dissent were marginalized and sometimes condemned and charged for heresy and blasphemy. However, it shows that they were part and parcel of a culture that was remarkable for its rationalism, secularism and tolerance. The purpose of the author is, probably, to show the secular, rational, liberal and intellectual past of the Muslims to the west and also to the Muslims of today who should not only own their secular and rational past but also try to create the same today. More importantly, perhaps, if these dissenting voices had continued to flourish, Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, would also have undergone a reformation.

4. Conclusion

The study focused on the secular, rational and tolerant side of the Islamic civilization as depicted by the author in

three different novels of the *Islam Quintet*. The analysis was divided into two sections. The first section analysed the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* for its overall treatment of the Muslim characters and their lifestyle that is dominated by material concerns. It tried to prove that the aristocratic Muslims of the *Banu Huda'yl* led very worldly lives in which luxuries of lavish food and undisciplined sex played a significant part. They were neither practicing Muslims nor religious bigots. On the contrary, they were very unorthodox and secular in their approach towards faith and in their daily-life practices. They neither intend to fight the enemy nor want to migrate from the peninsula which is now ruled by the Christian queen. They prefer to stay as long as their lives, properties and ancestral lands are secure even at the cost of their dignity, their faith and the destruction of their language, books and culture.

The second section of the analysis discussed various characters from the three novels of the *Islam Quintet* to analyse the unorthodox, secular, rational and tolerant side of these characters. It highlighted the non-religious side of Saladin's personality and the political side of the Kurdish leader's Jihad. The analysis demonstrates the remarkable culture for learning and scholarship through the powerful character of Jamila, scholarship of al-Idrisi, free thinking and rationalism of *al-Zindiq*, and the Socialism of the Trusted One.

To sum up, the study establishes that Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet* counters the western discourse against Islam and the Muslims by retelling the story of the Islam in the past: the past in which the Muslims are known for their unorthodox views, secular lives, tolerance, and a rich cultural heritage rather than extremism and ignorance; the past in which the Muslims were not what they are today and the West was what the Muslims are today.

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