
Only days after I finished reading G. Willow Wilson’s new memoir, *The Butterfly Mosque*, the pastor of an obscure evangelical church in Florida announced a ‘Koran-burning day’ – to condemn the 2001 terrorist attacks, for which he held Islam at large responsible, and to protest against the building of an Islamic cultural centre within so many feet of Ground Zero.¹ Newspapers the world over broadcast his intentions, imams and Obama got involved, and righteous indignation gave way to a circus of confusion. The event was cancelled; but the spectacle succeeded in muddying already turbulent waters.

If one can distinguish between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, the misunderstanding between the two has been the greatest tragedy of the twenty-first century. And in an era where fanaticism, Islamophobia and fear are continually fed by the global media, the world is in dire need of stories like Wilson’s.

In *The Butterfly Mosque* Wilson recounts her private conversion to Islam, her decision to visit Egypt, and her subsequent marriage to an Egyptian man. And yet, while the young author finds herself caught between the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’, the book stands apart from other memoirs about cross-cultural love. Unlike Betty Mahmoody’s *Not Without My Daughter* or Corinne Hofmann’s *White Masai* – where the woman weds an exotic but ultimately unsuitable husband from whom she escapes back to the west – Wilson seeks to assume the role of mediator in ‘the war between Islam and the West’ (5), to particularise her experience of Islam and thereby to dispel myths of cultural homogeneity, and, above all, to mitigate bad press on the role of women within Islam.

While studying at Boston University Wilson (who goes by the nickname ‘Willow’) finds that the teachings of the Qur’an resonate with her own, inchoate spirituality. Raised by atheist liberals among whom all talk of God was taboo, she at first pursues Islam on purely intellectual grounds. Taking Arabic and Islamic Studies, she resists daily the urge to pray. September 11 further complicates her burgeoning faith; but after graduating she accepts a temporary position teaching English in Cairo and on the journey there, she privately converts.

In Cairo Wilson rents an apartment with her American friend, Jo. There are the usual mishaps as they fumble through their first months in unfamiliar territory: the confusion of the marketplace; the inadequate hygiene; the challenge of the local dialect; and the desire to be accepted, and respected, by locals. Jo, in particular, is troubled by the Egyptian men who stare, leer and cajole – a misogyny which Wilson defends, in retrospect, as ‘an almost inevitable byproduct of political oppression, after all, as brutalized men turn around and brutalize the next most vulnerable population’ (270).

Through the school where they are teaching Wilson meets Omar – a passionate Sufi nationalist with a degree in astrophysics and a penchant for Shakespeare. Within a few months they are engaged. The narrator’s subsequent

efforts to reconcile her American, liberal self with her newly adopted transnational and religious identity form the bulk of the memoir. She must defend her conversion and marriage not only against the scepticism of family and friends, but suspicious national authorities. As a result, the book feels like an apologia – an effort to be understood, and accepted, by both Muslim and American cultures, and to forge a new space of understanding, a ‘better world’, between the two.

This ‘third culture’ (66), as Wilson calls it, is almost certainly informed by Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘Third Space’, where the encounter between two different cultures becomes a unique type of negotiation in which ‘the meanings and symbols of culture … can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew’, giving rise to a new, hybrid space of common identity. She says:

Everything we thought, everything we did or said or wore or espoused unthinkingly, had to be brought forth and reconciled. In the process, old symbols were given new vocabulary. That vocabulary would become the language we spoke in the culture we created for ourselves. (66)

Yet the ‘hybridisation’ of Egyptian society itself, attributed to the imposition of Western values, is not only an endearing ‘best of both worlds’ scenario, but also insidious and destructive, giving birth to a generation of disinterested émigrés who abandon their mother tongue for the more concretely profitable English language.

Much like Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Wilson is at pains to show that anti-western sentiments in Muslim nations might arise not from jihadist or fundamentalist leanings but from social, economic and political grievances. The impact of westernisation, for which the United States is largely held responsible, has very real and very serious implications for Egyptian society. In her depiction of variegated Egyptian society, Wilson demonstrates an obvious, but oft-forgotten reality: that Muslim identity is as adaptive, circumstantial, and evolving as any other; that fundamentalism is widely condemned by Islamic authorities; and that there is no single, unified, or universally agreed upon interpretation of Islam.

And yet, there is a profound contradiction in Willow’s representation of conflict. On the one hand, she seems eager to shed light on Egyptian hostility toward the United States. But there is a sense in which her repeated invocation of the ‘clash of civilizations’ and broad, over-simplified platitudes about ‘East and West’ perpetuate rather than challenge the discourse of irreconcilability.

Moreover, Wilson’s states that she seeks to create consensus rather than controversy, but the burden of the ego – the desire to be liked by everyone, to create agreement among everyone – is at once the work’s noblest intention and its greatest weakness. As self-appointed conciliator between ‘clashing civilizations’, the author seems to look down (from the elevated perspective of her ‘third space’) upon those less enlightened, or less self-consciously ‘hybridised’, than she. She divides other westerners in Cairo, for example, into two groups: those who live in wealthy enclaves and were guilty of the same failure to make basic cultural adjustments that immigrants in much more difficult circumstances were censured for in the West; or else, the serious converts who were ‘veiled up the eyes’ and ‘sported unkempt,

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2 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) 55.

vaguely pubic beards’ and seemed to be ‘playing an elaborate game of dress-up, aping Arab ways without understanding or self-awareness’ (215).

There are passages when her didacticism becomes almost unbearable, for example:

I would struggle to explain to Egyptian friends … that consumer culture functioned in a surprisingly complex and sophisticated … way in the West, playing on subculture and social memes and giving rise to an entirely new series of symbols (136).

Yet despite these essayistic digressions, The Butterfly Mosque wonderfully illuminates cross-cultural ironies – in particular, the lack of self-reflection in western criticism of Islam.

Indeed, this is not your typical love-conquers-all book (or at least not only that). You might not always agree with the author, whose opinions vary from the alarmingly insightful to the quietly controversial, but for those interested in Egyptian culture, attitudes toward Islam in middle-class America or the mechanisms of intercultural relationships, this is an eloquent and engaging read.

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