

Salim Bachi, *The Silence of Mohammed*, trans. Sue Rose (Pushkin Press, 2010)

Risk is what Salim Bachi has taken in writing his fourth novel, *The Silence of Mohammed*.¹ As is well known, it is always risky to write about historical figures, as it raises the question of veracity: how faithful is the representation to historical reality?² The element of risk multiplies, if the lives of the historical personages being reconstructed are well documented and, more importantly, if they are founders and consolidators of a religious faith. In such cases, the slightest departures from historical fact are likely to produce earth-shattering consequences. The original of *The Silence of Mohammed* in French (*Le Silence de Mahomet*) appeared in 2008 and the English translation by Sue Rose in 2010. From the fact that neither version has till now raised a storm of protest, it can be safely assumed that Bachi has not taken, as the Moroccan poet and writer Tahar Ben Jelloun points out in the Preface, ‘liberties with the facts’ (9).

If so, what reason is there for one to read the novel? If Bachi is simply recycling what is already known about the life and times of Mohammed, what is the significance of ‘the silence’ in the title then?³ After reading the novel, one must admit that Bachi has indeed lived up to the expectations he seems to evoke through its suggestive title. A simple example will suffice. At the very beginning of the first part of the novel, Khadija, the first wife of Mohammed, announces:

And yet my husband is a man of great learning and wisdom. When he came back from Basra, or Damascus, which is even further away, at the head of a caravan, he would always bring back manuscripts and devour them alone, away from inquisitive eyes. He often discussed them with his best friend, Abu Bakr, and together they would talk of the mysteries of this world. (21)

Most of the images of Mohammed in the above extract are familiar ones: Mohammed at the head of a caravan, Mohammed deep in discussion with his best friends, Mohammed talking of the mysteries of the world. But the image of Mohammed devouring manuscripts all by himself is a bolt from the blue. For Islamic religious and theological discourse represents Mohammed as illiterate. He is often credited with having ‘wisdom’ but seldom with having ‘great learning’. In contrast, nowhere in the novel is Mohammed represented as a man who does not know how to read and write. He is rather steeped in the discourses of Judaism and Christianity, perennially engaged in dialogue with scholars as much to dispel the clouds of self-doubt as to seek the showers of self-illumination. Fittingly, the first explosion of the silence of (in fact, about) Mohammed comes from his first wife, Khadija, who narrates the first section of the novel.

¹ Bachi was born in Algeria in 1971 and now lives in France. Published in 2001, his first novel *Le Chien d’Ulysse (Ulysses’s Dog)* won him Goncourt du Premier Roman (Goncourt Prize for First Novel). Bachi has three more works to his credit.

² For a lucid account of the controversy that the publication of William Styron’s historical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* gave rise to in the late 1960s, see Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) ix-xiii.

³ In Islamic religious and theological discourse, the name of Mohammed is always followed by the short prayer – peace be upon him (pbuh) – given parenthetically.

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The Silence of Mohammed is full of such explosions, superbly captured in the characterisation of Mohammed and those around him: his wives, friends, associates and adversaries. They are, above everything else, human beings. It is not by any aura of divinity or spirituality that Mohammed is singled out. It is there but not at the forefront. The point that is repeatedly made is, in the words of Aisha, 'that the man of God was just a man and like them consumed by passion' (255). It is impossible not to be touched by his profound humanity, especially at the time when his eldest son, Qasim, is dying at the age of two:

For the two weeks it took him to die slowly, his father stretched out beside him and talked to him all the time. When our child slept, he fell silent and watched him sleep. He forbade me to wake him. Sometimes, with all the tenderness he could still muster, he would lightly stroke his son's brow. Then he'd shut his eyes and weep in silence as if the fever already heralded the coming death in my beloved's mind. I've never seen a man more wretched during those agonising weeks. (36)

The same is true of the other characters: they are all swayed by feelings and emotions shared by the rest of humanity. Anger, hatred, jealousy move them as much as beauty, friendship and love. Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed, and Fatima, his beloved daughter, begrudge Abu Bakr being the first Caliph of Islam and exploit every opportunity to harass him. Khalid ibn al-Walid is openly contemptuous of Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph of Islam. The mutual jealousy between the wives of Mohammed is just one proof that they are after all human beings.

The four parts of *The Silence of Mohammed* are narrated by four different narrators. Two of them are male: Abu Bakr and Khalid ibn al-Walid whom Mohammed gives the nickname, 'the sword of Islam' (236). The other two are female, the wives of Mohammed: Khadija and Aisha. Significantly, the novel opens with the section narrated by Khadija and ends with the segment related by Aisha. This narrative pattern offers four very different but equally valid perspectives on the life and times of the Prophet of Islam. As I read it, the implication of this narrative structuring is that one has to listen equally carefully to what the male as well as the female associates of Mohammed have to say about him to form a balanced and comprehensive view of this 'passionate, courageous visionary, a man of his time who transcends the temporal' (326), as Christopher Moncrieff characterises him in the Afterword. True to the spirit of his title, Bachi gives Aisha, 'the best wife of the Messenger of God' (241), to have the last word on him.

The Silence of Mohammed is a secular venture. It historicises the Prophet of Islam to humanise him. It is not a moral allegory in the tradition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). The historicising, humanising impulse is also evident in its treatment of one of the most sensitive issues pertaining to the Islamic culture, that is, the practice of the veil. The final part of the novel, narrated by Aisha, throws important light on the historical circumstances necessitating and legitimising the use of the veil.

I am an ignoramus so far as French is concerned. Yet I think I have been able to have a feel of what Bachi is trying to capture in his language, thanks to Rose. If I have to choose a name for the kind of prose Bachi writes, it will be 'lyrical'. Bachi writes a prose suffused with lyricism, for only such a prose can bring together the temporal and

the transcendental and is able to sing out the beauties, charms and graces of both. Note how deftly the passage below blends the materiality of the temporal with the suggestiveness of the transcendental, qualities which only the best of romantic poetry can aspire to fuse together. Abu Bakr is soliloquizing:

I too am about to leave this Earth, this light which fills my eyes; my heart will soon be blinded. I will no longer taste innocent pleasures, like eating a piece of fruit, loving a woman or watching a child; my tongue will no longer move against my teeth in my mouth; my hand, my poor fingers, will no longer be raised to give a caress or shield my eyes from the glare of the sun; it will be dark until Judgement Day. If our prayers are genuine then we'll wake from the dead, and I'll see my beloved friend Mohammed again. How the time will have seemed to drag! But even time will no longer exist. I'll be gone, like my dear friend, for a limitless eternity. (118-119)

It can be argued that the historicising process is an ideological and hence a political endeavour. It indeed is. But it can serve a healthy as well as an unhealthy purpose. In my view, *The Silence of Mohammed* is meant to serve the former. By providing the life of Mohammed and the birth of Islam a historical context, it enables an informed understanding of both. At a time when Islam has come to be identified in the western mind with what the west is *not*, (that is, backward, decadent, irrational, militant and so on), the value of such an understanding is not difficult to appreciate.⁴ However, if the west has to change its hostile attitude to Islam, the Muslim world is also required to change the way it engages with Islam and the west. For a better and safer world to emerge, a two-way adjustment is what is needed. By decoding and inviting us to decode 'the silence(s) of Mohammed,' Bachi suggests the way the process should begin.

Md. Rezaul Haque

⁴ The first section of Chapter One titled 'Islam and the West' (3-35) in Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) is perhaps the best short introduction to 'the image of Islam in the West generally and in the United States in particular' (4).