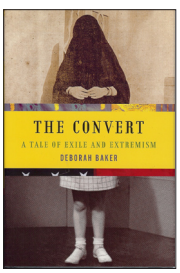
Pakistan



Deborah Baker. ***The Convert: A Tale of Exile and Extremism***

Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011. 246 pages. Illustrations, bibliographical references. Hardcover, US$23.00. ISBN 978-1-55597-582-1.

This book is based on the life of Maryam Jameelah, an American woman from a New York Reform Jewish family who, in 1962, after corresponding with notable Islamists thinkers of the time such as Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-Ala Maududi, converted to Islam and permanently left the West to settle in Pakistan.

The genre of Baker's work is, in fact, literary, rather than being a strictly historical or academic biographical study. As Baker admits in the "note on methodology," she has taken considerable liberties in quoting from Jameelah's corpus of letters, juvenilia, and her many published works, so as to frame a tale told, as if in Jameelah's own voice, of her troubled and alienated youth, leading ultimately to immersion in Pakistan in the 1960s. Furthermore, this is the Pakistan of the hardcore cadres of the Jamaat-e Islami movement where she keeps strict *purdah* (gender seclusion) and becomes the second wife of one of Maududi's loyal followers, Muhammad Yusuf Khan.

The lines between reality, fiction, and fantasy are further blurred, or evocatively transgressed, by the fact that Baker ultimately undertakes a "real" voyage of discovery and fact-finding to contemporary Pakistan where she encounters many of the actors involved in the narrative including the son of Maududi, Haider Farooq, and Maryam Jameelah herself.

Maryam Jameelah's frankness about her struggles with cultural adjustment and mental illness, both in the United States before conversion, and in her subse-

quent life in Pakistan, are publicly documented in her letters, many of which have been published (Jameelah 1989, 1990). Baker further draws on archival material donated by Jameelah to the New York Public Library. As a mouthpiece for the Jamaat-e Islami after her relocation to Lahore, Pakistan, Jameelah churned out a series of books during the 1960s and 1970s in which she became a native informant regarding the decadence and moral turpitude of Western culture. These themes bolstered her political and civilizational comparisons that in some cases anticipated later, more refined, critiques of Orientalism.

A strident polemicist and apologist, Jameelah, who never learned any language of the Muslim world and drew many of her citations for illustrating the failings of the West from encyclopedias and popular magazines, has been viewed by some scholars as an important factor in shaping Muslim perceptions of the West among a rising cohort of Islamic revivalists during that period. With titles such as *Islam versus the West*, *Islam And Western Society: A Refutation of The Modern Way of Life*, *Western Civilization Condemned by Itself: A Comprehensive Study Of Moral Retrogression and Its Consequences*, and *Islam and Orientalism*, Jameelah constructed a binary model of conflicting and clashing civilizational visions, with God, justice, and the future clearly on one side.

Since Baker does not need to practice the cool omniscient detachment of an academic historian, the work goes even further in interspersing her authorial voice and interpretations with the narrative of Jameelah's life, past and present. Part of Baker's internal dialogue revolves around the biographical process and the suspicions cast on the narrative framing of this life by Jameelah, whose naiveté becomes increasingly complicated as Baker realizes that many of the archival letters had been subsequently edited, post-dated, or even entirely fabricated. Baker's reflexive awareness of her role as biographer is interwoven at certain junctures, as are her judgments of her subject. The most polarizing choice that Baker makes is to position the story of Jameelah within the ideological and actual clash of the West and the Muslim world, most dramatically post 9/11. This is the "extremism" of the book's subtitle, as Baker blames Jameelah, through a sequence of rhetorical questions, for purveying a simplistic caricature of a monolithic and evil West that validated "jihad of the sword" through her personal "jihad of the pen." Did, in fact, the Manichean opposition of the West and Islam laid out in her writings script the scenario that was later enacted in the terrorist attacks?

Scholars of Islam in South Asia, and those more broadly interested in modern transnational flows will find the book a stimulating encounter with an enigmatic figure. Baker has undertaken considerable research into the historical context of Maududi and the Jamaat-e Islami in Pakistan during this period, as well as into Jameelah's background in mid-twentieth century New York. There are odd parallels between the experience and identities of Baker and Jameelah—and I note that the theme of Westerners encountering Asia is one treated by Baker in a previous book on the Beats (Alan Ginsberg) in India (Baker 2008).

For Maryam Jameelah, South Asia is almost a random location—the cultures, smells, art, music, food, and literature of Pakistan seem irrelevant to her. Her decultured experience is that of global Islamism, defined by what it opposes, "the

modern West." This contrasts starkly with the cosmopolitanism of Baker who "divides her time between Kolkata, Goa, and Brooklyn" and is married to the literary figure, Amitav Ghose.

Yet on reflection, is Maryam Jameelah the "exile" of the book's title or is she, in fact, an émigré? She chooses to leave the West and acquires a voice and welcome in Pakistan that she would never have known in New York. And oddly her agency seems to find expression and empowerment in an arena where her conversion brings cachet and, to venture into psychology, her borderline personality is supported by social containment. The latter part of Baker's book, based on her original research on Jameelah and those who know her, discloses that far from remaining a mouthpiece for Jamaat rhetoric, Jameelah came to criticize the founder, Maududi, as well as the aridity of Jamaat-style Islamist politics and ideology in favor of traditionalist "faith and spiritual purity" (214). Ironically, Jameelah's main sponsors, including her husband and publisher, Muhammad Yusuf Khan, do not understand English well enough to comprehend or attempt to stifle the shift in her voice (198).

At the end of the journey with Baker we may neither like nor understand Jameelah, yet through her story, we come to ponder this perplexing case of postcolonial encounter and the odd power dynamics that arose between the Islamist leader and an American misfit whose response to alienation was Islamic utopianism.

References

Baker, Deborah
2008 *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*. New York: Penguin.

Jameelah, Maryam
1962 *Islam versus the West*. Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf.
1970 *Western Civilization Condemned by Itself: A Comprehensive Study of Moral Retrogression and its Consequences*. Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Sons.
1971 *Islam and Orientalism*. Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Sons.
1976 *Islam and Western Society: A Refutation of the Modern Way of Life*. Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Sons.
1989 *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth in America (1945–1962): The Story of One Western Convert's Quest for Truth*. Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Sons.
1990 *At Home in Pakistan (1962–1989): The Tale of an American Expatriate in Her Adopted Country*. Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Sons.

Marcia K. Hermansen
Loyola University, Chicago