Review of The Calligrapher’s Secret by Rafik Schami

Rebecca Gould
beloved son, Sohail. The consequences of the sacrifice she has made are clear: this is not the Rehana we knew, because this is not the son she knew.

Sohail is no longer the revolutionary, committed freedom fighter he once was. A traumatic event just after the war has made Sohail turn to religion for solace but in so extreme a manner that he is now wholly absorbed in an orthodox version of his faith. He conducts religious discourses on his terrace, travels from one jamaat to another and clearly neglects his son who steals and lies but also picks up languages quickly and desperately wants to go to school. But Sohail no longer believes in the kind of education he himself received and, when matters come to a head, he sends Zaid away to a madrasa.

The education of Zaid is the central conflict between Maya and Sohail, leading to tragic consequences but at the heart of The Good Muslim lies the question for our times: who is a good Muslim?

Like a lot of historical fiction, The Good Muslim writes the past in light of the questions the present poses to itself. The reader will need to consciously remind herself that the events in the book take place before the events in The Satanic Verses and well before planes flew into the World Trade Center and changed the way the world perceived Islam. In other words the question, ‘Who is a good Muslim?’ asked of anybody living in South Asia in 1984 would not be the complicated, loaded one it is today.

And yet Maya appears to be infected with the anxieties of the present day: she picks fights with her vegetable seller for saying ‘Allah Hafez’ instead of ‘Khuda Hafez’ and is bothered by ‘people referring to God between every other sentence’. Is she the only one who can presciently read this as a sign of more sinister times to come or is she the intolerant one? When Maya thinks back to the incident with the vegetable seller, Anam tells us that ‘the memory of it brought a flash of heat to Maya’s cheeks. Now she would have to walk all the way to Mirpur Road if she wanted something’. No remorse for her rudeness then; just regret for what the consequences of it mean for herself.

Maya’s inability to understand Sohail can be seen in the fear and incomprehension with which she reacts to every change in her brother — the clothes he wears, his way of life upstairs, and most especially his remoteness and detachment from familial ties. She blames Silvi and her influence on him for this transformation, as if his turning to religion makes him a less intelligent and more suggestible person.

The latter is really troubling because it is based on an entirely imagined episode. Silvi, observing Sohail’s early terrace discourses, goes up to him and has a conversation that Maya cannot hear, but which she imagines thus:

Maya never knew what happened on that roof, what words were exchanged by Silvi and her brother. She tried to imagine it and she could conjure up only this: that Silvi approached Sohail, still kneeling from the prayer, and said, ‘You remember the slave Bilal. He was punished by Ummayah for becoming a Muslim. He was forced to lie outside in the heat with a stone on his chest. And what did he shout to the sun, beating mercilessly on him?’

‘One,’ Sohail replied, ‘One.’

That is how she dealt the final blow. ‘One,’ she said. ‘There can be only One.’ (176)

We cannot be certain that this is how it happened; but this is how Maya chooses to think it happened, and Anam does very little to contradict her.

This is where there could be a problem with the novel: that Anam, who could have asked the question ‘Who is a good Muslim?’ in any way she chose, chooses to ask it in the way a paranoid West today asks it, via an imperfectly self-aware protagonist who cannot see her own intolerance for what it is and wants to shape the whole world to fit her ideals. As a novelist, Anam has the freedom to express views not identical to her protagonist’s own, yet it is a freedom she could have exercised more energetically in The Good Muslim.

Despite this, the book reads very well. Anam writes beautiful, fluid prose; moves dextrously between the past and the present of the novel and makes the anguish and derangement of each individual believable. Maya’s own guilt at having helped many raped women with abortions balances Sohail’s guilt at having killed during the war; Joy’s determination to survive imprisonment and torture provides a bright counterpoint to Rehana’s lassitude. And Zaid, who could have been so much, and has so little, is a metaphor for the ruined potential of the young nation. We have invested in Anam’s characters and want things to move to a cathartic — if not necessarily happy — conclusion and are purged and satisfied when they do.

Perhaps what seem like faults in this book will be issues that Anam will address in the concluding volume of the trilogy. It would be a way to allow history to keep revising itself in light of new stories that emerge.

Rebecca Gould

The Calligrapher’s Secret

Rafik Schami


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‘The crucial question was not one of courage or cowardice, but of might and power in the state’ (421), says the narrator of Rafik Schami’s The Calligrapher’s Secret. He is ventriloquising Rami Arabi, father-in-law of Hamid Farsi, master calligrapher of mid-twentieth century Damascus. To the novel’s very end, Hamid Farsi is a mystery impossible to gauge according to normal criteria of readerly ethics. The master calligrapher sacrifices himself and everyone nearby for the sake of craft, leaving the reader guessing whether his sacrifices are noble or in vain.
The Calligrapher’s Secret

The difficulty of determining the ethical value of Hamid Farsi’s commitment to his art brings us to the novel’s thematic core: the relation between art and life and the debt these two spheres of experience owe each other. Read purely in terms of its plot, The Calligrapher’s Secret would appear to narrate a rather simplistic tale: older man marries younger woman. The new bride comes to hate her husband and develops an affection for his youthful assistant. That the bride happens to be an impoverished Christian in a Muslim-majority society merely piles one stereotype on top of another. Youthful assistant and new bride fall in love and escape to Damascus, setting up a new life in Aleppo under assumed names. Jilted husband, furious with jealousy, kills the only man he can associate with his wife’s desertion, a former customer for whom he had been writing love letters that turn out to have been addressed to his wife.

Unaware that he has killed the wrong man until it is too late, Hamid Farsi is given a lifelong prison sentence. He serves the majority of this sentence in the relative luxury of a special cell allotted to him by the prison governor who happens to love the inmate’s calligraphy. Hamid Farsi is allowed to practise his art in peace until a regime change results in his expulsion from his special cell and his confinement with violent criminals. Driven insane, Hamid Farsi is transported to a psychiatric institution, from where he disappears from the narrative, having either escaped to Istanbul and become a millionaire calligrapher, or having died in the asylum, as the caretakers who denied his escape claim. The novel is deliberately, and tantalisingly, ambiguous concerning the circumstances of Hamid Farsi’s death (if indeed this magical calligrapher ever dies).

But it is not for its plot that The Calligrapher’s Secret will be remembered. Rather, what remains with the reader long after finishing the book are the commitments art imposes on life. Nearly everyone in Schami’s novel is, at least in potentia, an artist. Nearly everyone is capable of losing their mind for passions that exceed the logic of everyday life. The real hero of The Calligrapher’s Secret is not in fact Hamid Farsi, for whom the novel is named, and whose actions drive the plot’s circumlocutions. Rather, the novel’s towering figure, as well as Hamid Farsi’s personal hero, is Ibn Muqla (886–940), executed in Abbasid Baghdad for his bold attempts to reform the Arabic script.

In the frame story of Ibn Muqla’s life that interrupts the narration of Hamid Farsi’s failed marriage, we read that the ambition of this most famous of all calligraphers was ‘to invent a new Arabic alphabet’ that, with only twenty-five letters, as opposed to the traditional twenty-eight, ‘could express all the languages known at that time’ (250). In order to carry out his plan, Ibn Muqla studied Persian, Aramaic, Turkic and Greek, and researched in detail the transformations undergone by the Arabic script from its inception to the tenth century. Anachronistically but also prophetically, the frame story reports that Ibn Muqla aspired to graft the letters P, O, W, and E onto the Arabic alphabet, and thereby to make possible the correct transliteration of Persian, Japanese, Chinese, and Latin words.

It is worth noting at this point a detail never explicitly stated in the narrative but which deepens the parallel between Hamid Farsi and his hero, Ibn Muqla. The latter was a Persian native of Shiraz. Like so many Persians from this city, he rose high in Abbasid administration, and served as vizier to no less than three Abbasid caliphs. Hamid Farsi, whose very name means ‘The Praised Persian’, was, as we learn late in the narrative, himself of Iranian origin. He was forced to flee with his father at the age of four to Damascus from Iran, where his sister and mother had been murdered ‘because someone had informed on his father for sympathizing with a rebel Sufi sect’ (352). This association between calligraphy and heterodoxy would appear to be only a repetition of the precedent set by Ibn Muqla, who studied all the languages of the world in order to arrive at a more perfect alphabet.

And this is only one of the many repetitions that structure The Calligrapher’s Secret. Collectively, these repetitions suggest that, for the purposes of this text, life moves according to the rhythm of art. Whereas Ibn Muqla was killed for grafting the letters P, O, W, and E to the traditional Arabic script, Hamid Farsi communicates to the Syrian government his ambition of instituting these same reforms a millennium later. Of the novel’s many instructive repetitions, the most ironic of all is the ultimate fate of the script reforming ambitions harboured by so many of the novel’s protagonists. The novel’s last word is given to Salman, Hamid Farsi’s young Christian assistant who ran away with his master’s wife. After Hamid’s disappearance from the world of the living, Ibn Muqla’s ambitions are transferred to his young Christian assistant. Salman’s secret plan, like that of his predecessors, all of whom were tragically executed, was ‘to devise a new kind of calligraphy in Arabic script’ consisting of ‘characters of a clarity that would make reading easier, show elegance, and above all breathe the spirit of modern times’ (444). Such repetitions teach us that, notwithstanding the novel’s title, its plot is guided by more than a calligrapher’s secret. In fact, all the brilliant calligraphers in this novel are trapped.
within patterns of repetition. In all cases, their passion for reform brings about their demise.

While Hamid Farsi is as unsuccessful as his Abbasid predecessor, his dreams resonate within the novel’s world like visions from another place and time. ‘Hamid Farsi was a prophet’, says an old acquaintance of the Damascus calligrapher towards the novel’s end. This acquaintance alludes to the narrative principle that structures Schami’s story and shapes his chapter titles. ‘A prophet in Damascus ends up as a rumour’ the Damascus storyteller continues, ‘We attack and persecute our prophets’ (442). The ultimate fate of Ibn Muqla’s proposed reformation of the Arabic script remains opaque by the novel’s end. While Ibn Muqla was executed and Hamid Farsi simply disappeared, Salman, who stole his master’s wife, remains free as Hamid Farsi’s archenemy. And yet, ironically, it is in the person of Salman, and, even more literally, his offspring, that Hamid Farsi’s dream lives on. Although Sarah, Salman’s and Noura’s only daughter, is not genetically related to Hamid Farsi, she is a child the master calligrapher could have spawned had he been a more loving husband and a better human being. Concerning Sarah, it is said at the novel’s end that she became a famous calligrapher. Such, Schami suggests, is art’s relation to life: it recapitulates figuratively the dreams we continually imagine but which we are not fated to live.

It bears eloquent testimony to the substantial support for a writer in exile which Lindfors was able to generate through the generosity of the University of Texas at Austin, which granted him a Visiting Professorship in 1974/75. While in Austin Brutus, who had previously been disinclined to write an autobiography, was persuaded by Lindfors to put his memoirs on tape. So at the age of fifty he set about recording his recollections, often in isolation. The present volume contains the transcripts of those sessions, supplemented by extracts from interviews, a transcript of class discussions with Texan students, and a contribution to a symposium on Contemporary Black South African literature. One or two of these documents have been previously published, but the vast majority of the material has been brought together here for the first time.

The taped narratives cover Brutus’s life until 1974 and include material on his family background, his escape from South Africa while under a banning order, and his subsequent capture and imprisonment on Robben Island. He also reflects at length on his poetry. The political views expressed are those of the mid-1970s, when Brutus was pessimistic about his chances of seeing his country liberated in his life time.

As a political activist Brutus led a turbulent life. He was involved in anti-apartheid boycott campaigns and founded the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SAN-ROC), which was instrumental in banning South Africa from participating in the Olympic Games. He suffered house arrest, before escaping from the country, first to Swaziland and then to Mozambique, where he was captured and returned to South Africa; there he was shot by a policeman after a dramatic chase through the streets of Johannesburg. While in hospital sympathetic members of the Indian Congress planned to spring him out of the place in a coffin. He was subsequently imprisoned on Robben Island, where for five months of his sentence he was held in solitary confinement. He spent many years in exile; he worked for the International Defence and Aid Fund in London and testified before the United Nations on the situation of political prisoners in South Africa. He associated with a vast range of interesting people from Eldridge Cleaver to Chou en-Lai, not to mention the innumerable writers with whom he shared a stage. There is obviously a good story to be told here, and Brutus tells it well.

Brutus is conscious that the tapes will have an audience and thus makes every effort to prevent them appearing ‘flat and monotonous’ (54). Accordingly his narratives are occasionally enlivened by witty, anecdotal detail. Thus, he recalls unsuspectingly explaining how to do crosswords to the informer who betrayed him to the Portuguese secret police; he remembers sitting up on the operating table to make a statement so that the doctors could get on with removing the bullet from his stomach; he confesses that he would not have run away in Johannesburg if he had known the policeman to whose care he was entrusted had won a gold medal for marksmanship; he tells how he successfully broke house arrest to go to church, commenting that the state had obviously wanted to avoid the adverse publicity of having to arrest him under
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