Readings & Conversations
Tariq Ali
with
Micheline Aharonian Marcom
19 November 2003

Introduction and Reading

Micheline A. Marcom: Good evening. I’ve been asked to just go over the format very briefly, which is that I’m going to introduce Tariq Ali just for about five minutes, then he’s going to come up and talk for about forty minutes and then we’re not going to take a break. We’ll just go directly into a conversation up here on stage for about twenty-five minutes, he and I. So...

Tariq Ali was born in 1943, in Lahore, into a Muslim family in what was then British controlled India. He attended a mission Catholic school and then studied at Government College where he became a pivotal figure in the University’s left-wing, anti-colonial politics. In 1963, because of his political activities and opposition to the Pakistani military dictatorship and in order to keep him out of prison, Tariq was compelled by his parents to go to England where he enrolled at Exeter College, Oxford, and studied politics, philosophy, and economics. In England, where he has lived ever since, he became very involved in the anti-Vietnam war movement. It was his activism in the anti-war movement during the 1960’s that secured him a revolutionary reputation. He debated with Henry Kissinger and then British War Secretary Michael Stewart, was invited to dinner by Marlon Brando and traveled to Vietnam on behalf of Sartre and Bertrand Russell to find evidence for the International War Crimes Tribunal. In an interview Tariq gave this year in Berkeley, he said, “I was in North Vietnam while the U.S. was bombing that country. You saw casualties every day. We were almost bombed ourselves on two occasions and that was formative. The key lesson one learns from that period is that nothing will change if you just keep sitting where you’re sitting.” [Applause]

One has only to look at the long list of nonfiction books, novels, plays, articles, reviews, and essays Tariq has written, interviews and talks given, films produced, to understand that he has always acted. Tariq is a long-standing editor at the New Left Review, a journal of the international Left, and editorial director at Verso, the imprint of New Left Review. He has written over a dozen books on world history and politics including the best-selling, The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihad, and Modernity, in which he analyzes and interrogates both religious fundamentalism and what he calls “the mother of all fundamentalisms”, American imperialism. [Applause] He is the author of the just recently released, Bush in Babylon: The Re-colonization of Iraq, which is both a social and political history of Iraq
since he fall of the Ottoman empire and its subsequent colonization by the British and a critique and analysis of the imperial ambitions of the key figures in the Bush administration.

Tariq has said that it was the first Gulf War, in 1991, and the general ignorance that the Western television commentators and journalists displayed about Islam and Middle-Eastern history and culture that awakened his dormant interest in Islamic history. He said, in an interview, “I wanted to pose a question which had become important already in the late ’80s and early ’90s which was why didn’t Islam have a Reformation like Christianity? I thought I would go to the roots of the problem where the answer lay and I went to Spain which was under Islamic rule for four or five centuries. I felt I didn’t want to write a history. I suddenly wanted to write a novel. So I wrote Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree about the decline and fall of Islamic civilization.” Hence his Islamic quintet was begun. The two other novels soon followed, The Book of Saladin which is in the form of a memoir dictated to a fictitious Jewish scribe by the Kurdish-born Saladin who took the city of Jerusalem from the Western crusaders – or invaders, depending on your point of view – in 1187. The third novel in the quintet, The Stone Woman, is narrated primarily by an aristocratic Turkish woman in the year 1899 during the demise of the Ottoman Empire. All three novels narrate encounters, clashes, overlaps, and crossings in history between the Christian West and Islamic East. Curiously, Tariq has said that it was the extensive research for these novels which enabled him to then write The Clash of Fundamentalisms.

Tariq is a regular contributor to The Guardian and The London Review of Books. He has, at different periods, founded a newspaper, a magazine, and an independent film production company. He has been described as one of the most penetrating and trenchant left-wing analysts of current events. Tariq writes, in The Clash of Fundamentalisms, that “In a clash between religious fundamentalism and an imperial fundamentalism determined to discipline the world, it is necessary to oppose both and create space in the world of Islam and the West in which freedom of thought and imagination can be defended without persecution or death.” Tariq’s body of work and his life-long activism reflect a passionate commitment to fighting for these freedoms and to telling the truth, no matter how unpopular or uncomfortable to those in the status quo.

Tariq Ali.

[Applause]

Tariq Ali: Good evening. Thank you very much. I’m very honored to be here. When I got the invitation from the Lannan Foundation I was very touched. Many friends had talked about this Foundation, especially the late Edward Said who left this world only a few weeks ago. [Applause] So I was determined to come here even though there were other temptations: George Bush was arriving in London [laughter] at roughly the same time and you can
imagine how tempted I was to stay behind and give him the welcome he deserved. [Laughter] But, somehow, I felt that I couldn’t let Patrick Lannan and the Foundation down because this had been organized a long, long time ago, so I will have to greet George Bush on another occasion. Not that it would have made any difference because the security was so tight that they made sure he never saw any of the 100,000 people marching against him. He probably saw a few people waving to him and his people told him that this has been a great visit, very successful. And he probably believes all that because, as you know, he’s not a great thinker. [Laughter]

Initially, when I was invited to speak here, I thought I would just do a reading from some of my novels. But then I decided not to do that. And I decided not to do that for a reason and it’s the same reason that led me to stop writing fiction temporarily and engage with the world again. Because when you write fiction you’re completely lost in it. You sort of have to break off from the world and do nothing else. And this set of novels which I started writing in 1990 were going pretty well, thanks, it has to be said, to the late Edward Said who, after he read the first one – I thought I’d write one and then return to my usual activities and he said, No, you can’t do that. You’ve just got to carry on and tell the whole story ’til now. What’s been happening in the clash between Islamic civilization and Western Christendom. And he was very encouraging, so I carried on writing them. But, once 9/11 happened, I did feel that there was a responsibility on the part of those of us who were neither Islamic fundamentalists nor supporters of the Bush administration to come out and produce a series of texts, essays, books if necessary, to try and explain what was going on in the world. And that’s the time when I sat down and wrote *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*. And I don’t regret that for a moment. And then, soon after, when it was obvious that Iraq was going to be invaded and occupied, I sat down and wrote a little book called *Bush in Babylon*, which is the history of Iraq, the history of that country’s resistance against great empires and an account of the rich culture of that country, and trying to explain to people both here and in Britain why this country will never cave in. So these two books disrupted that flow and, precisely for that reason, I thought it was best today to talk to you about the state of the world.

The state of the world today is that when there was a chance after 9/11, if there had been a saner administration in power in Washington, to use those events to try and solve the problems of the Arab world politically, without violence. In fact, that is what many people, not just myself but many other commentators, advised the United States to do. Saying that the question you have to ask yourselves is why people, young people, are attracted to terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, and try and find a way of stopping the flow of these recruits. And the best way of stopping the flow of these recruits is to sort out the problems in the Middle East for which, partially, you are to blame. And the two key problems in the Middle East were the continuing occupation of Palestine by the Israelis, totally backed by the United States of America, and the sanctions against Iraq which were begun
after the first Gulf War, carried on by the Clinton administration, implemented by the United Nations, and the weekly bombing raids on Iraq which happened for twelve whole years. Each week, U.S and British planes would take off and bomb parts of Iraq 'til they ran out of targets. So we knew it was a very weak country.

Now, when the United States and Bush and the people surrounding him built up the pressure, saying the reason we’re invading Iraq is because they have weapons of mass destruction. Now most people knew this was a lie at the time. Bush probably didn’t know that because it’s an open question as to what he knows and what he doesn’t know. [Laughter] Probably, they didn’t tell him. [Laughing] In any event, he went on repeating this endlessly, there are weapons of mass destruction. I’ve got three pages of quotes on all the occasions on which he said this to frighten the population – that these weapons could be sold to al-Qaeda terrorists and they could come and be used in the United States. It was crazy; totally crazy. And when they conquered Iraq and occupied it, they couldn’t find the weapons of mass destruction. And when Donald Rumsfeld was asked, well you were telling us there were a great number of weapons of mass destruction here, but we can’t find any, his reply was quite entertaining though he probably wouldn’t have thought so. He said, well, we can’t find Saddam Hussein but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t exist. [Laughter] I mean, in terms of stupidity, what can you say? One’s breathless. How stupid can these guys be, if they make remarks like that? It’s like Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld’s deputy, who, when he went to Iraq about several weeks ago, not on the last visit from which he almost never returned, but the visit before that, he gave a press conference in Baghdad and he was asked, what do you think the problem is? What is the problem? Why is there resistance in Iraq? And he said the problem is there are too many foreigners coming into the country. [Laughter] Think about that one. [Laughter] The fact that these people can come out and say stuff like that and the whole world does what you do, sits backs and laughs. It cries half the time at the appalling situation in the Arab East but they laugh. They say where are these guys coming from?

It reminds me of an occasion: I was in, before the war, in December before the war, I was debating one of Donald Rumsfeld’s advisors, Professor Ruth Wedgewood, a former Professor of International Law at Yale, and in private actually, she was totally intelligent, discussing with me, arguing with me, conceding some points, not conceding others. In public, before this massive audience in Berlin, she became a total zombie. When the Germans asked critical questions about the war, she actually said to them, the reason you Germans don’t want to support our war in Iraq is because you’re scared of wars. [Laughter] And the whole audience went aah. Does she know what she said? And then, seeing the audience, she said, well, I mean you’re scared of Saddam Hussein. And people said what? And she went on in this vein, totally unable to relate. And it was not an audience on the Left; it was an elite audience. Half the German Foreign Office was there; senior people from the ruling party were there; some of the best sort of cultural
intellectuals were there. Afterwards, the head of the German Foreign Office came up to me and he said, Herr Ali, it was very nice listening to you but listening to your opponent was an anthropological experience. [Laughter]

So we have this strange business where people who are normally quite intelligent, in public change their persona because they don’t want to be seen to be critical in any way of what’s going on. So we now have a grim situation in the Arab East. We have two occupations going on concurrently. One is the occupation of Palestine and the other is the occupation of Iraq. The occupation of Palestine is really never discussed seriously in this country because, as Edward used to say, no-one takes the Palestinians seriously. Palestinian suffering is by-and-large ignored. They are not taken as human beings. For official Israelis they are sub-humans. For the United States officialdom and they bulk of the media, they are terrorists. The Europeans feel so guilty about the Judeo side of the Second World War that they daren’t open their mouths too much. When they do, the Israelis pounce on them and say, you have no right to talk. So, it’s a very grim situation.

And if you don’t mind...... when Edward died....he is very strong in my mind just now because it’s not so long since he left us, I was quite staggered at the tone of the obituaries. There were unpleasant obituaries in The New York Times, unpleasant obituaries in the New York press, pretty vicious ones elsewhere in the United States. And the degree of hatred for this one individual was actually a big tribute to him. And he would have been quite entertained. I can hear him saying, so, those sons-of-so and sos in The New York Times couldn’t even leave me alone even when I was dead, could they? [Laughter] And then they couldn’t. And it’s a tribute to him; a sign that he has many lives ahead of him. But I ask myself, why does one Palestinian intellectual, a public figure in the United States, professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia, one guy.....they could give him Op-Ed pieces in The New York Times, The Washington Post? No. They could interview him on the networks, or if not the networks, at least NPR regularly, or PBS. No. Why? Because what Edward articulated went totally against the grain of what the propaganda was, as to what Palestine was and what it represented. He would have been able to argue against anyone. He was prepared to debate the Israelis, whoever. So they couldn’t present him as a terrorist. It was a bit difficult. For a start, he’d have been the best-dressed terrorist in the world. [Laughter] So they kept him off. And the more they kept him off....It’s almost as if they felt guilty themselves of what they were doing to him. And they began to hate him. He became the conscience of the West, constantly attacking them, never letting go, asking them what the hell are you up to? What do you think you’re doing with Palestine? Where do you think this is all going to end? And he became that country’s chronicler, the unofficial historian of his people for which he won respect throughout the world. And in his last days, he attacked the war in Iraq very strongly.

Now, ever since 9/11, the Neo-Cons who run the Bush administration have linked everything together so everything has become a war against
terrorism, whichever part of the world: you’re going to Colombia to keep an unpleasant regime of killers in power - the reason you’re doing that is because it’s a war against terrorism. You’re backing Ariel Sharon – that’s because it’s a war against terrorism. You’re taking Iraq – that’s again because it’s a war against terrorism. How is that a war against terrorism? Because the American public is told Saddam Hussein was backing al-Qaeda. Just pause at this. No-one else outside the United States believes this. Why don’t they believe it? Because in Europe and the rest of the world it’s well known that Saddam Hussein, for all his sins, was a total enemy of religious fundamentalism. He destroyed them in Iraq. His fellow Ba’athists destroyed them in Syria. The al-Qaeda people hate him. Osama bin Laden wanted to create an independent army to go and fight against him. So, to accuse Saddam of being linked to al-Qaeda is not accepted anywhere except in this country which is frightening, really, because what it shows is the power of the media to misinform and lie to people.

So Iraq was occupied and taken by the United States. And now we know what the situation is. It’s a complete mess. And when you criticize, people say, the apologists say, you’re anti-American. So we argue, no, we’re not anti-American, we’re anti the U.S. administration. There’s large parts of the American population which doesn’t agree with this and we sympathize with them. And we even sympathize with the poor soldiers, poor in every sense of the word, who’ve been sent to fight in Iraq and who are being killed for no rhyme or reason. They shouldn’t be there. That’s what we defend.

And then we are told the Arab world is atrophied, it’s dead, nothing happens, there’s no criticism, people defend these regimes. And I say this is a completely unreal picture of that world. Those of us who go to that world often, know how much many of these venal regimes are hated. They’re not liked by people there. And in terms of there being no criticism, the people do nothing else. If you were to compare a conversation...if some clever person were to take a tape recorder and sit in a café in Cairo or Damascus or Amman or Beirut and just tape the conversation for a few hours, he or she would find that the discussions taking place between ordinary people are conversations between people who are not only engaged with the world but whose level of knowledge, even though some of them might be illiterate, their level of knowledge of what is going on in the world is much higher than that of the average citizen of the United States of America. [Applause] And if you were to compare those café conversations....I would suggest a comparison. I would suggest that someone, at the same time as these café conversations are being taped, has a tape recorder in about twenty different cities of the United States, in McDonalds. [Laughter] Let’s tape them and then let’s decide which culture, at the present time, is more advanced than the other. Or let’s do other things: let’s, sort of, do a litmus test and ask how many people, how many citizens in the United States can name ten capital cities of Latin America? - a part of the world not too far from you. And do the same test in the Arab world of how many capitals in Asia they can name? And you’d get a big surprise.
And as for the claim that Arab intellectuals are apologists for their regimes, this angers me so much because we have, in the Arab world, a tradition of poetry which is turbulent and critical which has no equivalent in the West. No equivalent at all in the modern West. It did in the nineteenth century, but it has no equivalent today. And in order to demonstrate that to you today, what I will read is not from my own work – I mean, it’s in my work but it’s some of the poetry from the Arab world, just to show what that world is like. This is a poem....I went to the Arab world after the so-called Six Day War in 1967 when Israel had carried out what it called a pre-emptive strike, that’s what it said, against Egypt and Syria, taken them by surprise, smashed their armies and the whole Arab world is in complete turmoil. A great Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani, who died a few years before this century, wrote a poem. When I went after the Six Day War to several Arab capitals – we were sent by Bertrand Russell to do an investigation on what had happened, why this war had happened, how many Palestinian refugees there were, and to come back and report to Russell and his Foundation, in ’67. So we went everywhere. We went to Amman, we went to Damascus, we went to Cairo, we went to Beirut, but leaving aside all that, everywhere I went, people would come up, whether they were taxi drivers, people in cafés, dissident students, official bureaucrats serving in the governments, sometimes official politicians, and whisper in your ear, Have you heard Nizar Qabbani’s latest poem? Everywhere. What was this poem which had set that world alight? I’ll read it to you. It’s a poem called Hawamish ‘ala Daftar al-Naksah, “Footnotes to the Book of Setback”. They’re short verses, so don’t panic. [Laughter] But it’s verse 17 which got the poem banned. He had to rush into exile which apart from anything else shows the power of poetry in that culture. And this is how the poem goes:

Friends,
The old word is dead.
The old books are dead.
Our speech with holes like worn-out shoes is dead.
Dead is the mind that led to defeat.

Our poetry has gone sour.
Women’s hair, nights, curtains and sofas
Have gone sour.
Everything has gone sour.

My grieved country, (he’s talking of the Arab nation)
In a flash
You changed me from a poet who wrote love poems
To a poet who writes with a knife.

What we feel is beyond words:
We should be ashamed of our poems.
Stirred by Oriental bombast,
By boastful swaggering that never killed a fly,
By the fiddle and the drum,
We went to war
And lost.

Our shouting is louder than our actions,
Our swords are taller than us,
This is our tragedy.

In short
We wear the cape of civilization
But our souls live in the stone age.

You don’t win a war
With a reed and a flute.

Our impatience
Cost us fifty thousand new tents. (referring to Palestinian refugees)

Don’t curse heaven
If it abandons you,
Don’t curse circumstances.
God gives victory to whom He wishes.
God is not a blacksmith to beat swords.

It’s painful to listen to news in the morning,
It’s painful to listen to the barking of dogs.

Our enemies did not cross our borders
They crept through our weaknesses like ants.

Five thousand years
Growing beards
In our caves.
Our currency is unknown,
Our eyes are a haven for flies.
Friends,
Smash the doors,
Wash your brains,
Wash your clothes.
Friends, read a book,
Write a book,
Grow words, pomegranates and grapes,
Sail to the country of fog and snow.
Nobody knows you exist in caves
People take you for a breed of mongrels.
We are a thick-skinned people
With empty souls.
We spend our days practicing witchcraft,
Playing chess and sleeping.
Are we the ‘Nation by which God blessed mankind’? (that’s a phrase from the Koran)

Our desert oil could have become
Daggers of flame and fire.
We’re a disgrace to our ancestors:
We let our oil flow through the toes of whores. (that’s a reference to the Saudia Arabian royal family)

We run wildly through the streets
Dragging people with ropes,
Smashing windows and locks.
We praise like frogs,
We swear like frogs,
Turn midgets into heroes,
And heroes into scum:
We never stop and think.
In mosques
We crouch idly,
Write poems,
Proverbs,
Beg God for victory
Over our enemy.

(Then this is the famous verse 17)

If I knew I’d come to no harm,
And could see the Sultan,
This is what I would say:
‘Sultan,
Your wild dogs have torn my clothes
Your spies hound me
Their eyes hound me
Their noses hound me
Their feet hound me
They hound me like Fate
Interrogate my wife
Take down the name of my friends.
Sultan,
When I came close to your walls
And talked about my pains,
Your soldiers beat me with their boots,
 Forced me to eat my shoes.
Sultan,
You lost two wars.
Sultan,
Half of our people are without tongues,
What's the use of a people without tongues?
Half of our people
Are trapped like ants and rats
Between walls.’
If I knew I’d come to no harm
I’d tell him:
‘You lost two wars
You lost touch with our children.’

If we hadn’t buried our unity
If we hadn’t ripped its young body with bayonets
If it had stayed in our eyes
The dogs wouldn’t have savaged our flesh.

We want an angry generation
To plough the sky
To blow up history
To blow up our thoughts.
We want a new generation
That does not forgive mistakes
That does not bend.
We want a generation of giants.

Arab children,
Corn ears of the future,
You will break our chains.
Kill the opium in our heads,
Kill the illusions.
Arab children,
Don’t read about our suffocated generation,
We are a hopeless case.
We are as worthless as a water-melon rind.
Don’t read about us,
Don’t ape us,
Don’t accept us,
Don’t accept our ideas,
We are a nation of crooks and jugglers.
Arab children,
Spring rain,
Corn ears of the future,
You are the generation
That will overcome defeat.

Now, whatever else you might think about this poem, it’s not lacking in self-criticism. [Laughter and applause]
And Nizar Qabbani continued to be the conscience of his people, writing poems for Palestine, *Children of the Stones* was the title of one of his poems, “You have created a new Spring for us.” He wrote in his exile; he had moved to London and when he died in ’97, ’98, he had one last wish, that he be buried in his beloved Damascus. And the Syrian government, to their credit, sent an official plane to bring his body back and a million people marched behind his cortége. A million. And I wonder how many...whether that would ever happen in the West for any writer? [Laughter] So when we talk about cultures and what a culture represents, it’s foolish to pretend that Western culture has an inherent superiority over that culture which was what the people who were for taking Iraq are arguing: we’re taking civilization there. All these people suddenly discovered old empires and their modernizing role and what they were capable of doing. We’re taking modernity there. This is what they argue. But they don’t need your sort of modernity. These are people who need something else. They need a different order in their own countries. They need democracy; they need accountability. They don’t want regimes that are permanently in the pay of the United States, or are kneeling permanently before the great empire. That’s what angers them. That’s what their poets speak about.

Qabbani, of course, died but the two great poets still alive in the Arab world, Saadi Youssef and Mudhaffar al-Nawab are Iraqi poets, born in Basra, both of them are Shi’as from those regions in southern Iraq which have always been very hostile to Saddam Hussein’s brand of Baa’thism, and have attacked him. When the United States was about to enter Iraq, there was a conference which they called – in London, it was held in a secret hotel – and this was a conference of Ahmed Chalabi who they’ve now put in power in Iraq and his henchmen and a few other people who have been on the payroll of the U.S. intelligence agencies – this was a secret conclave in London – and Saadi Youssef who was in his London exile observed what was going on and even though he was extremely hostile to Saddam and had fled the country in exile he was angered and as this conference was taking place Saadi Youssef wrote a poem. And it was called *The Jackal’s Wedding*. And when I met him after the fall of Baghdad I said, Saadi, explain to me what the symbolism is of *The Jackals’ Wedding*. He said, you know, in southern Iraq, in the summer months, it’s so hot we sleep under the sky. We have our beds outside our homes, in villages and even in towns, on the roof terraces and it’s a wonderful sleep – undisturbed; the air is fragrant, everything’s quiet, we just have starlight. But, he said, once every six or seven months, there’s a conclave of jackals and they come near a village and they mate and they make a terrible noise and they queue up to do their business and there’s a dreadful stench. A total stench shakes the villages and the next morning we wake up slightly sort of, you know, alienated from this experience and every villager says, Oh, God, did you smell that jackal’s wedding last night? He said that’s why the jackal is the most hated creature in Iraq. And he said that’s why, when I saw these people gathering in a secret London hotel, I called the
And this poem which Saadi Youssef wrote was addressed to his fellow poet in exile in Damascus, Mudhaffar al-Nawab. Now, just a word about Mudhaffar al-Nawab. He was a poet who actually took up arms against the Baathist dictatorship and had to flee. He was kept in prison, tortured, fled to Iran, captured by the Shah’s police in Iran, tortured there, and handed back to the Iraqis whom finally he managed to escape. But he yearned for home; he yearned for the Baghdad of his childhood and his youth. And he wrote this wonderful poem:

I have accepted my fate
Is like that of a bird
And I have endured all
Except humiliation,
Or having my heart
Caged in the Sultan’s palace.
But dear God
Even birds have homes to return to,
I fly across this homeland
From sea to sea,
And to prison after prison after prison
Each jailer embracing the other.

And when I met Saadi and I said people say you’re the greatest living Arab poet today, he said, No, Mudhaffar al-Nawab and I are the same. And there were three of us after Nizar Qabbani died but then al-Jawahiri who died aged nearly 100, was also one of us. Al-Jawahiri who was much older than them had commemorated the 1948 anti-British uprising in Iraq with poems that were recalled by many Iraqis, who have a long memory, when Baghdad fell to the Americans. This is what al-Jawahiri had written:

I see a horizon lit with blood
And many a starless night.
A generation comes and another goes
And the fire keeps burning.

And this is what the intelligence agencies didn’t warn the politicians about – that this is a country with a national consciousness and a historical memory which goes very long. They fought the British Empire to a standstill and finally defeated it. To imagine that they would accept an occupation, however much they hated Saddam Hussein, was crazy. And these poets spoke for those people. And Saadi Youssef wrote a poem, The Jackal’s Wedding which I’ve told you about and he addressed it to his other friend, Mudhaffar al-Nawab:

O, Mudhaffar al-Nawab,
My life-long comrade.
What are we to do about the jackals’ wedding?

You remember the old days:
In the cool of the evening
Under a bamboo roof
propped on soft cushions stuffed with fine wool
we’d sip tea (a tea I’ve never since tasted)
among friends....
Night falls as softly as our words
under the darkening crowns of the date palms
while smoke curls from the hearth, such fragrance
as if the universe had just begun

Then a cackling explodes
from the long grass and date palms –
the jackal’s wedding!

O, Mudhaffar al-Nawab –
today isn’t yesterday
(truth is as evanescent as the dream of a child) –
truth is, this time we’re at their wedding reception,
yes, the jackal’s wedding
you’ve read their invitation:

O, Mudhaffar al-Nawab,
Let’s make a deal:

I’ll go in your place
(Damascus is too far away from that secret hotel...)
I’ll spit in the jackals’ faces,
I’ll spit on their lists,
I’ll declare that we are the people of Iraq –
we are the ancestral trees of this land,
proud beneath our modest roof of bamboo.

And Mudhaffar al-Nawab replies with another poem from Damascus:

Would you ever forgive a lynch mob
Just because they pulled your stiff corpse
From the gallows?

And never trust a freedom fighter
Who turns up with no arms –
Believe me, I got burnt in that crematorium.

Truth is, you’re only as big as your cannons,
While the crowds who wave knives and forks
And this degree of hostility to the occupation was reflected in Iraq itself. When the United States got to Iraq and realized there was no-one there to support them, they were amazed. The fact that they were amazed is quite staggering. Why should you be amazed? If your country is being invaded and occupied, normally, most people, normal people, are not happy. They might hate their rulers, but they don’t like being occupied by foreign powers, certainly not by the United States and definitely not by Britain. The British sent two-thirds of the British army to occupy Iraq using the same basis that they had occupied in the ‘20s and ‘30s. And many of the areas they are occupying were scenes of resistance in the ‘30s. So they are being greeted today with a lot of hostility and this is going to carry on. Whenever empires decide to occupy countries as a display of imperial power, there always is a resistance. The notion that empires act on behalf of the people whom they are occupying is a sick joke. That’s never been the case. Empires always act in their own interest.

Today the big talk is democracy, human rights, this is what we’re fighting for, because this is convenient to use these glib phrases. But people in the Arab world know that the United States had massive influence in that world throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s. In none of the countries, none of the countries where they had influence did they bring democracy. We don’t have democracy in Saudi Arabia. We don’t have democracy in Egypt. We don’t have democracy in those imperial petrol stations which are otherwise known as the Gulf States. In none of these countries do we have democracy. So the notion in the Arab world that we are going to have democracy inside Iraq is, of course, not taken very seriously. Because everyone knows that in oil-producing countries there is normally no democracy that is permitted at all, whether it’s Latin America; whether it’s the Far East, Indonesia, Brunei; whether it’s the Arab world. Democracy is not encouraged because if you permit democracy, this democracy enables the people to change their own governments and one day they might produce a government which might tell Westerners to get out of there and establish their own control over their own oil, which is what the Iranians tried to do in the ‘50s and they were toppled; which is what the nationalist Arab regimes tried to do from the ‘60s and late ‘50s and onwards, and they’ve been in state of constant confrontation. The notion that democracy is somehow linked to the needs of an empire is, of course, a total joke. The needs and the interests of empires dictate their allies always. During the 1920’s, the late ‘20s, in the first decade after the victory of the Russian revolution, a lot of Western countries – the United States included – were very sympathetic to Benito Mussolini’s take-over in Italy.
After 9/11, once I was traveling back from Germany, I’d gone to launch one of my novels, *The Stone Woman*, which had been published there, and some German publisher had come and said, here’s a book for you. Try and read it on the plane. It was in German, so I just put it in my briefcase without looking at it. This was in October, 10/11. There had been a seminar at the Goethe Institute where we had discussed these events and I took this book and arrived at Munich airport. They opened up my briefcase because they were nervous, and I had a Muslim name, and they looked at various articles I’d written and then they saw this book, in German, which I hadn’t even looked at. It was a tiny little book. It was an essay by Karl Marx on suicide. [Laughter] So they thought that they had captured a great terrorist leader. [Laughter] They suddenly said, you can’t go on the next plane. I said, why? They said you’ve got this book; there’s these other articles. So I sort of laughed at first. Then they took me up to question me and I finally lost my temper when the chief of police at Munich airport said, we might not let you board this plane. At that point I said that I wanted to make a phone call to the mayor of Munich and they said, oh, you know him? And I said, yeah, he introduced me to the big audience yesterday where I presented my novel. At that point they collapsed. And I said to them, I said, look, a word of advice to you guys. In Germany, of all countries, you shouldn’t stop people reading books. Don’t do it, I said. And they got very nervous. What are you saying? We’re Fascists? I said, No, of course I’m not saying you’re Fascists. But I’m saying there’s a history in this country of burning books which you didn’t like. Some of the great literature of Europe was burnt in pyres, so don’t start doing it again. This is a book published in your country which some publisher handed to me. It became a big *cause célèbre* in Germany and they’ve never done it again. But it made me slightly nervous.

So when I was traveling to New York to give a lecture at a seminar, I thought I’d better be careful, just in case. You know, you don’t want to tempt people. So I carried an autobiography of Benito Mussolini. [Laughter] I just thought I’d read it anyway, just to see what this guy was made of because his chums were back in power in Italy and I thought….and as I was reading this book, I was quite astonished. This was a book published in London in 1928 by Hutchinson, a big publishing house, and the edition I was reading was the eighth or ninth edition of this book. But then, what struck me was that the introduction to Mussolini’s autobiography had been written by the American ambassador. I said, well, well, well. It was in the interests…. And I noted it down in this little book I carry with me when I’m traveling, just for little things like this, and it reads as follows: The name of the ambassador was Richard Washburn Child and the title page informed the English reader that this is a specially authorized edition .... ‘The specially authorized editions to this book have been made by arrangement and approval of Il Duce, bringing it up to the year 1939,’ i.e. on the eve of the Second World War. The dear, old U.S. Ambassador wrote, ‘In our time it may be shrewdly forecast that no man will exhibit dimensions of permanent greatness equal to those of Mussolini.’
Now, the point I’m making is that when it chooses, great empires basically do what they want to against the people they regard as their real enemy. The American ambassador wasn’t the only one. Winston Churchill, who has acquired a universal reputation as the sort of English bulldog who took on the Fascists... actually, in this book, Mussolini writes how much he adored Churchill, and how grateful he was that Churchill has visited Italy and praised the Mussolini regime, which he had. He said ‘this regime represents civilization against the Bolshevik hordes at our gates.’ That’s what Churchill said. So when empires, either the British or the American empire, need people, they use them. And they try and make friends with them against whom they regard as the common enemy at the time. And at that time it was Soviet Russia. During the whole Cold War phase, it was Soviet Russia, or China, or Cuba, or Vietnam – all the countries who were trying to improve their conditions, with varying degrees of success.

And in that period, and this is the central theme of The Clash of Fundamentalisms, throughout the Cold War the United States used the most reactionary Arab regimes and Islamist currents in these countries to fight against their common enemy. Osama bin Laden was trained by the United States. The bulk of the leadership of al-Qaeda was trained by the United States. They had training camps not so far from here, in the Arizona desert, which were set up to train people how to use Stinger missiles, how to kill, how to blow up houses. It was done here because they then thought it was in a good cause. Then Communism collapsed and those needs no longer applied, so they dumped these people and dumped on them. They didn’t need them any more. So these guys, ignored by the empire which had used them, ignored by the countries which had encouraged them to go – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – then became renegades, rogues. It’s like, you know, when lots of policemen become incredibly corrupt and start working with gangs, undermining law and order. They change sides. Same thing happened here. And these guys changed sides and decided to carry out these hits. But that’s why history is extremely important and shouldn’t be forgotten.

And that’s why I’ve been arguing, even before the war in Iraq, that this a tragedy, not just for the people of Iraq, but it’s a tragedy for the United States which is sending young soldiers to die who have no desire to go and die for no rhyme or reason. Iraq threatens nobody. It was a weak country. And this clique of Neo-Conservatives surrounding Bush decided it would act as a good lesson for the Arab world and the world at large to demonstrate imperial power. Well, has it? It’s failed on that front. They are now incredibly nervous. It’s a big mess. And the resistance in Iraq has done a number of things: it has led to a number of Democratic politicians finding their tongues again and becoming critical. Having approved the war, approved all the anti-civil rights measures, the Patriot Act, the lot, suddenly now they’re discovering this is a mess and beginning to speak up. A few, not too many, but it’s a start.
Then you have the plans to punish Syria and Iran. Well they’ve gone now. There’s no way in which any sane Pentagon general is going to send his troops to take Syria and Iran. The Syrians and Iranians are saying to the United States, you really want to come and take our country, after what’s happening in Iraq? Try it. Try it. And for Ariel Sharon…. when Baghdad fell he told the Palestinians, now I hope you Palestinians will come to your senses, now that your great protector has gone. As if the Palestinian cause was dependent on one person, either Saddam, or Arafat, or anyone else. This is a struggle that has been going on in different ways since ’48, and in a more exaggerated way since 1967. That hasn’t worked either. So the situation which has been created by the United States is a total and complete mess. One of the forces that is necessary to reverse this situation and to pull out of these countries and to try and create a different United States, exists here. It’s public opinion; it’s American citizens. You know another Republican President, Eisenhower, in his retirement speech, made a very powerful speech where he warned of the dangers of a military-industrial complex which he said could take over the country and challenge democracy. Unless, he said, we have a vigilant and alert citizenry, democracy could suffer. You can add now to the military-industrial complex the media networks that service this complex; that are uncritical, who precisely do not want anything that approaches a vigilant and alert citizenry. But nonetheless, that is the need of the hour. Without opposition and dissent in the United States, people fighting elsewhere against the empire, whether it’s Latin America or the Arab world or wherever, are doomed unless American citizens begin to see that an empire and imperial activity is not in their interests.

Thank you. [Applause]