

## Ali Eteraz's *Children of Dust*

### Reviewed by David Waterman

*Children of Dust: A Memoir of Pakistan.* Ali Eteraz. New York: HarperOne, 2009. 339 pages. ISBN: 978-0-06-156708-7.

Titles can be misleading. Dust has nothing to do with the meteorological conditions in the hot, dry country where these children mature, but refers to Satan's lack of esteem for creatures which God had created of dust (Quran 17:61). Ali Eteraz's memoir of growing up in Pakistan and the USA takes the reader between the extremes of desire and fear as experienced by a boy wanting to fulfill his destiny as a servant of Islam, while tempted by the earthly world – the world of flesh, of dust – and his attempts to reconcile the ideal with the everyday hypocrisy and brutality surrounding him. Irony and humor are not forgotten in this contemporary version of “A Portrait of the Muslim as a Young Man,” as Eteraz enjoins us: “Read! [...] and remember, you can't get a death *fatwa* for laughing\*” (xii; \* probably).

*Children of Dust* is divided into five sections as we follow the young Ali from a time before his birth, when his father makes a *mannat* with Allah, promising that if a son were born to him, he would be raised as a servant of Islam; the hoped-for son arrives, and is named Abir ul Islam (Perfume of Islam). Indeed, it is this *mannat*, this covenant, which will alternately inspire and torment Ali throughout his youth. Book One is set in Pakistan; the family is poor in spite of Abir's father's training as a doctor. Here, Abir readily absorbs the stories he is told of contemporary Pakistani history by his father, fantastic tales from the Quran by his mother, and even more fantastic firsthand mystical accounts from his grandmother Beyji, all of which inspires him in his vocation as a *hafiz-e-Quran*. Two events, however, arrive in quick succession to remind the family of their covenant, and result in Abir's being enrolled in the *madrassa*: the baby brother's death in mysterious circumstances, and Abir's near-death from typhoid; the typhus *jinn* is defeated in due course by readings from the Quran.

The beatings in the *madrassa* ultimately lead Abir to rebel, for which he is incarcerated in the storage room for several days, thus keeping him on the path of obedience. Book Two describes the family's move to America, and their attempts

to remain part of the orthodox Islamic community while living in the Bible Belt, with all of the difficulties implied as Abir negotiates his way between the Quran Study Circle and the ABC sitcom *Boy Meets World*, between the sermonizing of the Jamaat missionaries and erotic chat on AOL. Abir once again has a plan for independence, going from a desire to change his name from Abir ul Islam to simply Amir, to enrolling in a Manhattan university; a genuine insight comes from sonnets sent by a beautiful girl, Una, and his interpretation of the poems as “liberating [... the poems] allow me to identify myself as a Muslim without having to take on the baggage that my parents and Saleem and the QSC added to it” (146). Book Three finds Amir abandoned by Una, and instead sharing a dorm room in Manhattan with Moosa Farid, the new roommates becoming each others’ touchstone of competitive orthodoxy. As they don’t drink or go to parties, the young Muslims spend their time watching movies; one in particular – *The Siege* – stands out in its ambiguity. On the one hand, the suicide bombers are portrayed as pious Muslims, while on the other the film denounces martial law as a response to terrorist attacks, leaving Amir without the clear-cut answer he’d hoped for: “At the end of the movie I learned that the same confusion extended to the rest of the group. We’d gone in expecting to become angry – no, *more* angry – and we’d left not knowing what to say” (158). Amir’s covenant gathers credibility and momentum as he traces his family lineage to Abu Bakr Siddiq, the first Caliph, who accompanied the Prophet in his flight from Mecca; an impressive story, exposed as a forgery by the end of Book Three, made even worse as the lie was invented to dissimulate Hindu ancestry. While many Muslims around him are praising Osama bin Laden, Amir – still believing himself the descendant of the Caliph – sees only a fighter posing as an Islamic scholar, while Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* is seen as a genuine threat because it provokes doubt regarding the divine status of the Quran. Rather than burn the book, Amir hides it in the Art History section of the library, knowing that pious Muslims will not encounter it there. The sexual desires Amir feels conflict with his piety, and the search for a wife becomes urgent: Kara is Lebanese but Christian and immodest; Bilquis, met on AOL, becomes his soul-mate by elimination, although her father hates Punjabis, so the families will not agree to the marriage. Losing hope of finding a bride in the US, Amir and his family travel to Karachi, but the big-city girls have all been Westernized, causing Amir to head for the desert in search of an uncorrupted, orthodox bride, only to discover how others see him, as a: “stand-in for the entirety of the infidel West. To be more blunt: I was *not* a part of the *ummah*, the universal brotherhood of Muslims” (220).

Book Four sees Amir return to a Christian university in Atlanta for his junior year, where he discovers postmodernism and seemingly unlimited sexual freedom. He becomes the President of the Muslim Student Association, thinking of himself

as “Muhammad to the MSA,” an egocentric power trip which even he realizes is “a charade” (247; 248); Amir finally abandons his confrontational approach after recalling Levinas’s advice that life should be interactive, not power-seeking (266). The final book is a string of epiphanies for Amir, who is now in Kuwait, having chosen the Arab world for his grand-scale project of Islamic reform. He has once again changed his name to Ali Eteraz (Noble Protest), although the name is about all he possesses; he has lost everything else, including his law career, his money and his family. He cannot reform alone, and plans to recruit a Shaykh, a Sculptor and a Princess, who represent freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and financial patronage, respectively; even more surprising is his success in finding such people willing to join him. But Amir’s prolonged contact with his host, Ziad, will have a deep impact on his ideas of reform and allow him to embrace Islam on a more primary level, without all of the political and intellectual baggage; all of humanity, rather than Islam, becomes the object of service and of mutual belonging: “We were all children of dust” (324). Many simple, ordinary events lead Ali on his voyage of discovery: his day off-roading with Ziad, flying kites and photographing insects; a musical celebration with Pakistani workers; the story of Rumi and his teacher, Shams of Tabriz, who became one in their “I-ness,” or a simple conversation with his host, wherein Ali realizes that he has been obsessed with the wrong covenant, a secondary covenant which has pushed the primary Covenant of Alast into the background (328; 333).

Ali Eteraz’s memoir is of course the story of one young Muslim – Abir, Amir, Ali – yet it will undoubtedly find a wide readership due to its universal message of keeping our priorities straight in a world where people are often manipulated and constrained by political baggage, those religious and national affiliations which set up a conflictual, competitive framework of us versus them, rather than the “we-ness” of humanity as a whole. Ali’s story is long and heart-rending, sometimes funny, sometimes frustrating, and his willingness to share it makes us all better off in the telling and re-telling as we reflect on our own covenants and baggage.