

RE-IMAGINING PURPOSEFUL JOURNEYS:

RIHLA IN CANADIAN-MIDDLE EASTERN
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To travel is to vanquish

Arab Proverb

During the rise of classical Islamic civilization, its citizens established an impressive tradition of writing on travel, journeys and foreign migrations. The urge to do so drew its inspiration in part from religious roots: the most paradigmatic journey of all was the Prophet's, who moved to Medina to escape the plots against him in Mecca; the journey's importance was reinforced by the once-in-a-lifetime requirement for the believer to journey to Mecca for the pilgrimage. The result is an impressive history of travel writing and documentation, ranging from a description of trips to and from the *haji*, to letters to business associates about cultural activities in foreign capitals. Generally, this writing is grouped under the term *rihla*, which means *purposeful travel*. It is not a little strange that this rich vein of Islamicate (cultural nexus created by a multidimensional Islamic society)¹ productivity has not been deeply probed by analysts; for while some accounts have attracted enough attention to be translated, they really only serve to signal how vast the storehouse of memoirs are in personal libraries throughout the world (Broadhurst, Dunn).²

Certainly the Orientalist tradition in Western Middle Eastern studies has been slow to recognize the significance of this prodigious output, to examine its importance in the development of Islamicate culture, and, for that matter, to give it much attention as a genre within Islamic literary history. In our day, post-colonial analysts have often examined the writings of migrants and exiles, with an implicit/explicit intent, usually to indicate the unfortunate result of colonialism, but they have not searched this material to determine the relevance of earlier models (Vassanji, 1985, 63-67).

Happily a step towards remedying the latter situation has recently been taken. In *Muslim Travelers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, editors Eickelman and Piscatori have brought together articles surveying the scope of this travel literature. What emerges is a far more complicated picture of the relationship of religion to the genre than one might have supposed. Their researches show initially that the *rihla* genre encompasses *hijra* (emigration), *haji* (pilgrimage), *rihla* (travel for learning, etc.) and *ziyāra* (visits to shrines and holy places); according to the authors, all of these are practiced under some degree of purposeful religious intent. Yet, the literature they spawn and the motivations they endorse reflect "pervasive intricacy and even ambiguity" (Eickelman 5). Thus the term *rihla* embraces far more than our notion of *purposeful journey* would suggest, since migration for business or pleasure sometimes carried with it the need to establish the community wherever Muslims put down roots, a quasi-cultural as well as religious motive. It would seem, then, that even the most secular of motivations might also entail intentionalities of a covert religious provenance. Travelers' writings shift back and forth between the religious and what we would call the secular. One may conclude that these writers are quite capable of shifting their self-understanding between several different cultural and personal agendas, without apparent discomfort.

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Reflecting the elasticity of *rihla*, the boundaries continually shift: religious concerns may be expressed in business or educational forms, and private matters may be garbed in religious language. In short, ambiguities born out of identity differentiations, whether racial, historical, political or ethnic appear to be part of the genre, not necessarily generated by recent experience (Malak, 1993).

In the light of this elasticity, this study assumes a very complicated relationship between Islamicate culture and any new environment that immigrants from this part of the Islamic world enter, and it is instructive to look at a contemporary migrant community in the first flush of its literary development. We may, through it, discern some of the means by which the processes hitherto expressed in the *rihla* material unfold. As a kind of test case, this article will focus upon the literature that has principally grown out of the Canadian-Islamicate experience.

RIHLA, A 'MEMORY TEMPLATE' AND MEMORY THEORY

From one perspective, journeys are undertaken all the time; we apparently move about from the earliest moment of conception. Journeyings that are important are hooked to memory's wall and take on their full character as we read meaning into our lives. Hence, one way we can approach the material is to note how people remember, for through remembering, they not only trace the progression of their lives, but perceive a larger purpose for their peregrinations. These rememberings are thus templates for organizing personal understandings. They also reflect a coloration process,

by which the lived experience is retold by means of and/or through the screen of a valued model.

ESTABLISHING THE RELIGIO-CULTURAL TEMPLATE

Further, the focus on memory has solid grounding in foundational perceptions in self-understanding in Islamicate society. A quick checklist of the major influences reflects the centrality of it: the message of God in the Qur'an is not new, but a *restating* of a message already told by many prophets to many peoples, including Christians and Jews (Qur'an 11:136 and 17:106); the great *ancestors of the past* were prophets whose lives exemplified the way God deals with his people (11:285; 11:136); the Qur'an chronicles the lives of the faithful, and adjures the believers to remember God's ways of dealing with them (2:40; 2:31); the *Sira* (the Prophet's biography) and the *hadith* (traditions) construct a view of the *Prophet's remembered* existence that becomes normative for Muslim life and morals³; the *shari'a* (law) is constructed upon the community memory of the doings and sayings of the Prophet, so that the contemporary believer is guided by the authoritative model of the past⁴; norms of community behaviour are adjudged according to those arising from the *exemplariness of the past*; thus Sunnis look to the great moments of the rightly-guided caliphs of the *first generations of Islam* (Hodgson, I, 246-247); Shi'is *remember* the massacre of Karbala and comprehend it as universally significant (Schubel 118f.); Sufis adhere to the Qur'an's words to 'remember God' and do so in rituals clothed in the Prophet's and the Saints' presence (Schimmel; Waugh, 1989; Hoffman). Thus, specifically for a Muslim, a plethora of figures from the past provide the models for this *epic* dimension, and in the restatement of these in contemporary experience the *ummah* (Muslim community) continues the great purposes of God in existence (Kilani, 1992). In short, in Islamicate culture, memory is alive to these valued patterns and one might examine how they become 'templates' operative in narratives of personal and social existence.

In order to give focus to our discussion, we will give most of our analysis on prophetic material, since, following Eliade, the prophetic tradition has had a dramatic impact on the rendered meaning of life events:

The prophets affirm...(that) historical facts become "situations" of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer upon them...the historical event becomes a theophany. (Eliade, 1969, 103)

This understanding of the change wrought upon the religious mind by the prophets was incontrovertibly and formally enshrined in the religion established by the Prophet Muhammad.⁵ Hence Qur'anic texts are, at one level, a normative reflection on the way that God has intervened in the affairs of human kind. Likewise, what happened to previous believers is transformed into mediation on the character of God. In

both instances, the remembering associated with the life of the Prophet brings with it the proof of an authentic and treasured life; the factor is a critical ingredient in the development of personal narratives. However, the imprint of this theme filtered into writings by the other prophetic traditions, i.e. in Judaism and Christianity. Its shadow can be found even in those writings that are avowedly contemporary and secular.

THE ROLE OF THE TEMPLATE

This notion has relevance for the understanding of Canadian migrant narratives, because, through it, we can look for evidence of a valued pattern operative in the background. It is what may be termed a 'template'. It colors the telling with the deeper needs of personal and community meaning. As a preliminary illustration, we can turn to Marwan Hassan's novel, *The Memory Garden of Miguel Carranza*. In it, memory is a garden whose realities flit like shadows behind the scenes, urging the directions of surgeon Carranza's movement and driving him to his end: "Memory was not using sleight of hand. He changed direction to evade the prescience of his own mind and the foretold event it was leading him to" (Hassan 118). The 'memory template' in his psyche haunted him to the point that he saw Islamic Spain's intricate arabesque crafted in his patient's brain tissue; it goaded him to the extent that he dashed after an *ifreet*⁶ even though it was guiding him towards the doors of his own death (Hassan 53). In Carranza's case, the 'memory inset' not only elicited the past but forced him, although resisting, down unwelcome pathways. Ultimately this memory inset meant he was not totally in command of his destiny.

THE MEMORY THEORY OF RENE GIRARD

If we wish to place such a conception of memory within a theoretical context, we can draw upon the work of Rene Girard. Girard develops the concept of "triangular" or "mimetic" desire, by which he affirms that humans do not within themselves create autonomous desires, but rather mimic or model their lives on or through a model ("a mediator"). Thus a subject person does not carve out a goal/meaning for life by dint of his/her autonomous machinations, but selects a legendary or mythic model that mediates the goal. In his study of *Don Quixote*, Girard maintains that the goal of being a perfect knight is mediated by Amadis of Gaule, who Quixote holds, is "the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we, the others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry, should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best will come closest to perfect chivalry" (Girard, 1976, 40; from *Don Quixote* I, 16, 199). Meaning incorporates a transcendent dimension that interposes itself between the subject and the object, becoming part of the

sum total of the individual (Tausig, 1993).

Following Girard's line of reasoning, every tale told has elements of the epic within it, for it involves the working-out of the goal through the model; each person's story becomes a conglomerate of these kinds of transcendent influences (Eakin, 1985).

What we will explore here is the way in which the memory insets play a role in Canadian writing. In turn, these will provide us with some insight into the way in which these writers maintain continuity with the past, even as they winnow their experiences in Canada in the light of their valued patterns from the past.

RIHLA AS MIGRATION: EXILE AND CONSTRUCTION

70 *The Religio-Cultural Template:* The notion of emigrating entails a disengaging from the personal meaning of homeland, that sense of specialness being replaced by another, a promised land. Certainly some immigrants talk as though Canada were the promised land, a straight adaptation of the ancient biblical motif. The Master in Vassanji's *No New Land* reflects this theme. But generally the shift is always against the power of memory of the land that once held promise, but which present circumstances required the immigrant to forego. Even in religious terms, where loyalties like 'Whither thou goest, I will go' predominates, migration is read as a remembered exile (Book of Ruth 1:16).

Yet exile in Muslim literature is an occasion for construction. The template comes from the life of the Prophet himself. His *modus operandi* was to shape a new community, a community that would symbolically transform the humble little town of Yathrib into Medinat-l-nabi. The shift in perspective opens on several layers of meaning, at least one of which emphasizes the project of creating a new community. The anticipated result was the transformation of the woebegone migrants from an enclave of the Prophet's supporters (without visible means of economic viability!) to a vigorous corps out of which Islam could and would radiate to nearby tribes. This imaginative projection symbolically appropriated surrounding peoples and lands into cohorts for this enterprise.

A moment's reflection suggests, however, that Medina must have been seen to be an Other by Mecca, the city which had originally rejected the Prophet. Mecca must have felt like a city under siege by a new doctrine and a new order.⁷ Muhammad's role while he was resident there had been directed by the desire to fashion a new social ethic; when he moved to Medina, the Meccans must have felt there was a social revolution going on around them and they were ambivalent about the implications. They did not want to be regarded as old-fashioned and staid, but they did not want to lose control either. The sources indicate that they watched what was going on in Medina with fascination and no little fear. Medina was now off-limits to them, and rapidly becoming somewhat foreign.

For the Prophet, exile was the occasion to bring about a genuine Islamic community—he would authenticate the social ideals he had elaborated in Mecca, but which he could not bring to birth there. The *Sira* reflects the conceptual dominance of a merging of peoples into a 'new community':

The apostle instituted brotherhood between his fellow emigrants and the helpers, and he said according to what I heard—and I appeal to God lest I attribute to him words that he did not say: 'Let each of you take a brother in God.' (Ibn Ishāq 234)

In the *hadith* literature, this melding of *muhājirūn* (immigrants) and *ansār* (helpers) is stated in this manner:

Narrated Anas, 'When' Abdur-Rahman bin' Auf came to us, God's Apostle made a bond of fraternity between him and Sa'd bin ar-Rabli' who was a rich man. Sa'd said, "The *ansār* know that I am the richest of all the *ansār*, so I want to divide my property (equally) between us' (al-Bukhārī, V, 81)

The Constitution of Medina stated it boldly: "They are one umma to the exclusion of all men" (Ibn Ishāq 234). The 'prophet's poet' meditated on the community: "They gave him a home in which a guest of theirs / Need have no fear—an (ideal) home" (Ibn Ishāq 320). This became a theme played out among Islamic peoples throughout their history. 71

THE CANADIAN REFLECTION

This template surfaces in the Canadian context, carrying forward many of the thematic motifs evident in its early environment. Coping with migration through construction of a new community is clearly seen in the work of M. G. Vassanji. In *No New Land* we encounter the story of Nurdin Lalani, who migrates from East Africa to one of those sprawling suburbs of Toronto, Mill Woods. He and his family end up in Sixty-Nine Rosecliffe Park Drive, a highrise peopled with a delightful cast of immigrant Isma'ilis. From that time on, their orientation to the new land becomes a matter of radiating lines from the Rosecliffe centre—to the CN tower, which stands as a kind of beacon of acceptance, - to Honest Ed's the dazzling emporium of all the good things in life—to the school gym that became the mosque every weekend. Here Nanji, bright but flawed, wrestled with eternal questions like "Can we survive here, with our God...can He survive?" (77) Jamal, whom his wife, Zera, described as a dormant snake that one should walk carefully when near, dreamed out loud: "Wait, when I've made my millions I will have all the intellectuals like you and artists and musicians around me, my own durbar where you don't have to worry about mundane things like where your next meal is going to come from" (78). When Esmail was punched out by a rabid group of young rowdies taunting "Paki, Paki," within minutes the apartment was flooded with sympathetic countrymen, all stymied by the sheer monstrosity of the act and its implication for their history. Nanji spoke it: "The blacks

kicked us out, now the whites will do the same...Where do we go from here?" (103)

The rootlessness implied in the question would be totally traumatic were it not for the power of commitment: how can the immigrants be committed to a land and to its attending culture if every pocket of trouble implies they must move on? If the paradigm of the twentieth century is to belong to a nation, what of those who own none? Do such people become, as Rushdie somewhat strongly depicts them, as "bastard (children) of history?" (Rushdie 394)

For the Missionary, the answer is no. The community stays where it feels the sacred is: "Canada to him was a veritable Amarapur, the eternal city...This was the final stop" (198). Eternal meanings are found in the mundane of Toronto, until there is a disjunction between this land and its perceived sacrality. Until that moment, this should be the abode of the faithful. As they stay, a new Dar-as-Salaam is created in Canada. This is the Missionary's vision, whose purpose was to stiffen up the little community. With it, Sixty-Nine had the authority and the meaning to be the centre of community life and the membrane that held them together, tied them to excellence. What he saw enthused him. Canadian space had been transformed. The building was filled with the scents and sounds of Africa, not of Toronto. Chappatis, samosas, kebabs, conversations at the A-T in front of a plaster goddess in the foyer, frightful debates over the fear of becoming like them, (the Canadians) - when and if you succumb and eat pork. All this meant that the community had their own identity, their own place. Their collective memory was intact. "He was very happy" (198).

The Missionary would not understand Bissoondath. He has criticized this submerging of the person in the community found throughout Vassanji's work, decrying "the background becoming the foreground for no apparent reason save authorial self-indulgence and that headstrong urge to present community instead of letting community present itself" (44). The Missionary would see his analysis laden with Canadian assumptions - that the individual is more important than the community, that the rights of one should set the standard for all. The message of the template emphatically dismissed such notions. Vassanji was, in fact, only walking the well-worn path set in memory by the Prophet: 'You are the best community.' If there are literary problems with *No New Land*, they do not arise from Vassanji overthrowing the template; this is the way it is in a Muslim system. What may be assumed is some basic conflict over the issue between Muslim writers and their new environment.

At another level, too, memory defined the meaning of the future, for wherever they came from, Guyana, East Africa, Cuba, India, New York, Vancouver, the past would not let them abandon their identity. They could not watch the Canada Day parade, munch on hot dogs and eat French fries like 'them.' The fireworks would inevitably remind the community of an earlier and greater display in their homeland. Who they married became a standard of how much they had lost their true selves, had fallen prey to some foreign element in their character. But the slick Jamal, the successful lawyer, knows both sides of the fence. He is flying to Singapore to set up an office, because there is a Muslim group there who wants to immigrate, and he knows that

money is to be made from them. A new migrant community has all kinds of people and one must accept them as part of God's community. The template remains, faintly perhaps, yet the characters are judged accordingly.

RIHLA'S CONFLICTS: ANTAGONISMS OF MORAL AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE

The Religio-cultural Template: Emigrating may have produced a new community but it was not without its costs: Muslim memory has contended that Muhammad and his followers had immediately to deal with the politics of personal displacement. Even as he left, he had to leave certain critical things behind: all his business relationships, all his supporters who were too weak to make the trip, the grave of his beloved Khadijah, the sights of his first revelations and converts (Ibn Ishāq 216). There is always valuable baggage left behind. Still, in Ibn Ishāq's *Sira*, a poem reads:

But when he came to us God displayed his religion
And he became happy and contented in Medina.

He found friends and ceased to long for home. (238)

For one thing, the ache for the home terrain was mediated by the memory of conflict...alienated by hostile Meccans, despised by the aristocracy and their pagan traditions, Muhammad's prophetic days had been filled with conflict. Yet even in Medina, he had to face tough issues, despite the poet's claim that all was serene. The conflicts experienced were meted out not only through the strangeness of the environment, and the newness of the locale, but also in terms of values and legitimacy. What memory provided was not the displacement of distance but of veracity. Migration demands the whole person to stand up and be counted; it allows no one to hide behind the mask of cultural sameness. The calling-into-question comes in terms of the deepest held values.

Once more, literature about the early days of the tradition is instructive, for it introduces us to another formative genre: conflict. The *Sira* records the contentions in Yathrib: local unconverted Arabs, while committed to Muhammad as a leader under terms of the constitution, challenged his position as a Prophet (Ibn Ishāq 235); the *ansār* complained of the inequitable workload placed upon them by the *muhājirūn* (Ibn Ishāq 229); local Arab tribes pretended to be Muslims then turned and sided against the new community (Ibn Ishāq 239); the *ansār* turned their backs on the immigrant Muslims and even fought against them (Ibn Ishāq 242); the Jews resented contributing to the cost of war against the Meccans (Ibn Ishāq 263). Beyond all these, as highlighted throughout the *Sira*, was the basic antagonism towards the Prophet's religion. It fomented bitter rivalry.⁸ Memory portrays wide-ranging and serious conflicts, challenging the Prophet to the very centre of his commitment. Throughout, the Prophet adhered firmly to the roles affirmed in the Qur'an.⁹

CANADIAN LITERARY EXPRESSION

In 1976, Peter Baker, one of the Arab pioneers in Canada, published his memoirs of the years 1907-1927 (Baker 1976). Peter Baker was in reality Ahmad Ali Ferran, escapée from the Turkish conscription for young Arabs to fight against the Yemenis, and his stories of the early days were first serialized in the Yellowknife newspaper. He died in 1973, before he was able to see the book that bears his name. A stone monument was erected in his honor in Yellowknife and he remains one of the heroes of the early twentieth century migrants. The text is filled with Muslim trappers, entrepreneurs and peddlers, such as Alex Hamilton (Ali Hamdon), Sine Ally, James Darwish, Alex Kaliel, but what is significant for our purposes is the moral tone it expresses: of the 32 chapters in the book, almost all treat the topic of fair play, good character or honest practice in some manner. His memories seem to revolve around the experience of the displacement of personal values.

74 The scope and depth of moral concern is reflected in his conflict with Kelly Esper, also from Lebanon, which elicits his only reference to Islam in the whole text. Esper had proposed they start a business in the north, and largely on the basis of Baker's contacts, they were able to get credit and supplies from companies in Edmonton and Winnipeg. He expresses the view that he had known Esper only sporadically in Lebanon, but he soon realized that he was in for trouble:

My partner was illiterate and spoke broken English. He wasn't capable of talking business with any businessman and was very rude-natured. I don't wish to give myself undue credit, but it was due to my efforts that we were able to get our supplies. Whenever he talked to anyone, he always mentioned that he had to raise money on his life insurance policy in order to finance our business. Obviously not a good partner. (140)

The tensions came to a head when the Sergeant of the RCMP charged him with threatening to assault Kelly over the latter's ferreting away the account files, a charge that he vehemently denied. It was a conflict that clouded the remainder of his story. It was the low point in his career. He writes:

Sergeant Schultz...said he had to go to the office but would come and see me the next day. I usually prepared meals for the two of us, but that night I ate supper all by myself. I felt he was bad enough to try murder if he knew he would get away with it. I understand he told Father De Pourte that he was a Catholic, and I an infidel Moslem. In a country inalienably Christian, but avowedly secular, religion was being played as a wild card. (143-144)

When his partner tried to cripple him by placing boards with protruding nails beside his bedside, Sergeant Schultz proposed to Baker that he (Schultz) write a letter breaking up the partnership. Only later did Baker learn that the agreement to absolve him of the debts of the partnership was not worth the paper it was written on. Moreover, he discovered that Schultz was deeply involved with Esper, because typed letters were

sent all over the western part of Canada advising that Baker was a fraud and a cheat. Since Schultz had the only typewriter in the area, it was not difficult to determine who had sent the letters. When Baker finally came face to face with Esper at a dealer's store, Esper told the dealer that even Baker was giving him credit, so he should do the same. That caused Baker to blow up. He grabbed Esper and was about to punch him out: "You dirty and lousy skunk! Me, give you credit! I am giving you a punch in the nose!" The dealer stepped between them, but Baker always resented the rotten way he had been treated, partially at least from the way his religion had been used against him (165).

Baker's commitment to the rule of law, even in the backwoods of Alberta, is reflected in his reaction to the Canadian government official requiring that all fur buying take place in a fur buying post. The requirement was an evident result of Hudson's Bay Company and other 'official' post owners lobbying the government to stop independents. Baker, like others, traveled around to the trappers by dog sled and traded directly with them. Despite the fact that he thought he was a friend of the head of the post operation, Northern Traders, he was stunned to hear from the government minister in Edmonton why the rule had been imposed: "It wouldn't be necessary if it wasn't for those damned Syrians and Jews going around fooling the poor Indians!" Baker writes:

It was quite a slap in the face to me. Obviously that remark was made about me and although I didn't cheat the Indians and in fact helped them by supplying them with necessities at a lower price than anyone else, I had to abide by the law. I picked up two licenses, one for Sparke Lake as my main post and one for Thecultheli Lake, an outpost, and came home. (192-193)

For Baker, the law had to be respected, even if he did not agree with it, and, despite his fondness for a few drinks of moonshine and poker-playing, his story establishes that his attitude toward life and work was based on a strong sense of rectitude, of certain principles being in place.

Another dimension to the conflicts of migration is found in Kamal Rostom's little story, 'The Dishes Are Still in the Sink' (Rostom, 1989, 24-29). Here, Galal, the immigrant from Cairo, slowly decays at his centre in a tiny apartment while his wife has found work immediately. He, with his long career as a writer in Cairo, and now his talents are regarded as useless in Canada. Besides he was 'too old.' His daily visits to the employment centre are nothing but exercises in obsequiousness to haughty officials who treat him like a free-loader. Always the head of his family, always the breadwinner, always at the centre of Egyptian intellectual life, here he was emasculated and drained. Nobody was interested in what he could do, what he could say, what he could write. Nor could he return to Egypt because of his children's hopes in Canada. He was trapped, without a way out. His only job was to reduce him to the chores of the maidservant in his friends' houses back home: washing the family's dishes.

The theme of loss is a prevalent one in immigrant literature, but this story has a particular poignancy. For Galal's background is resoundingly male-dominated, at least in the public sphere. Not only Egyptians, but Canadians expect the male in the family to be the major contributor to family financial resources. His migration had left him bereft of all those status roles. The experience is played out many times in immigrant society, where the skills of the father seldom fit with the employment opportunities in Canada. The result is an onslaught on the traditional status of the male in the family, and the basis of the individual's sense of place in the family. Even the appliance repairman reminds him again of how Egypt streams the less quick students into technical schools, reserving university only for the most clever. Now his position impresses on him that everything would have been different had he only gone to technical school. Now he is reduced to wondering about his great intellectual heritage, and the painful separation from what he used to be. *Rihla* is experienced as a fundamental conflict with his sense of being. Memory provides the materials for the deepest conflicts.

RIHLA'S CHAOS: THE PARALYSIS OF PARADOX

The Religio-cultural Template: In Islamic writings, the first emigration was not to Medina, but to Abyssinia. In contrast to the memories of post-Islamic Mecca, when the move to Medina is but a token of the triumph of the faith, the Abyssinian venture was fraught with doubt. The story does not reflect a confident Prophet, but a hesitant human being facing an uncertain future: "If you go to Abyssinia, (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress." (Ibn Ishāq 146) Notice there was no divine assurance in this migration, only the hope that the king would take pity on them.

The case is even more paradoxical: on the one hand, the poet rhapsodies about the move to Abyssinia:

Mistreated and hard tried in Mecca's vale,
Namely, that (here) we have found God's country spacious
Giving security from humiliation, shame and low-repute. (Ibn Ishāq 148)

At the same time, one of the migrants, 'Uthman b. Mazun, rails in resentment: "Did you drive me out of Mecca's vale, where I was safe / And make me live in a loathsome white room" (150).¹⁰

Indeed, the *Sīra* recalls that they were harassed by agents of the Meccan Quraish, who tried to have them sent back. Abyssinian politics were unsettling, making their stay dependent upon the good graces of an insecure King, all the while being challenged because of their religion. Facing the trials of a country in turmoil, they grasped at any straw of hope, and they 'heard' a rumor that the Meccans had converted. After

the long journey back home, they learned the real news: none had converted. Worse still, they now had to steal into Mecca, where some of Muhammad's followers were kept under house arrest. Out of the eighty-three people who had migrated, only thirty-three returned. Of those who did not return, we can only speculate: they may have converted, or decided not to return until Muhammad moved to Medina, or not at all. The inconclusiveness of the story indicates the paradox: this migration was a journey of self-doubt. For the Prophet, the trauma of this failure was mitigated by the miraculous *mi'rāj* to heaven (181-187). But the *Sīra* tells us nothing of the traumas of his followers. Surely they were locked in a paralysis of logic, of goods promised but not fulfilled, of hopes dashed, without another voyage, another country or another vision to bolster their flagging egos.¹¹ Yet they continued to believe. Here, then, is the basis of another discovery: in the language of the soul, personal security is sacrificed for futurity, rootedness for the promise of true community. For a large percentage of them, they found somewhere within an inner strength for the promised future. In the deepest movements of belief, then, paradox opens onto new identities.¹² This memory set is observed at work in the writings of Nadia Ghalam.

CANADIAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF PARADOX

An Algerian by birth, Nadia migrated to Canada early in the 70's. She moved to Montreal, where many French-speaking North Africans are located and found employment with the French-Canadian national service, Radio-Canada. In her poetry and short stories she explores the moods of the emigrant/immigrant.¹³ In her short story "The Fresh Start," Louise, the Canadian girl, falls in love with Mourad, the recent immigrant. He is full of self-loathing because he can find no work of value. He feels totally inadequate to return her love. He is haunted by the great paradox: return to a past understanding or stay for a fresh comprehension:

To return to Algeria! To return and haunt the green and white cemeteries where family and friends lay! To return not to believe in death and discover in the misty roads of the past faces and affections which are the only truths of childhood. And at last to understand! To understand the history that kneads every individual, to give birth to a people, and to recreate a history hardly lived and already gone.

Yet it would be illogical to change countries unceasingly, to become saturated with different values and morals, as if happiness were at the end of the journey. It was better to take the time to live; to know that such countries are not tamed until one is mature enough to control his relations with them; to understand that all is not as easy as one thinks it is. And to separate the dream from reality. It will surely happen that something or someone to cling to will show up. Someone who will help him forget that he is bored, worn out, and without future. (41)

For Mourad, memory becomes a kind of curse, for it brings again the paradox—"every time a difficulty arose, he wanted to go back to Algeria, to run away and start again in a better way. For the first time he was conscious of the difficulty of being a fully responsible man" (47). Such notions reflect on a characteristic of migration experience, where the homeland becomes idealized and the new locale full of bitterness and angry transitions. Memory transforms home into a paradise, while a trip home can end in total disillusionment, as Kaul eloquently writes.¹⁴ Such conceptions are, of course, characteristic of much migration narrative, but they take on added meaning when the new land is viewed as hostile.

Out of this comes an emotional change of perspective, a new sense of presence; in short, Mourad has to construct a new identity. While the new identity is not clear, the awareness that he is now forming himself and constructing his being is liberating. He now can engage in the process of building a new community.

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RIHLA'S PROMISE: THE NEW FREEDOM

The Religio-cultural Template: There comes a moment when there is the sea-change in society, a completely new set of hopes, concerns, intentions. Religious literature regards these as paradigmatic moments. In the Muslim case, Muhammad's will to establish a new community was not to transfer an old system of government and old tribalism to Medina, but to reform the very basis of human life altogether. Under the will of Allah, he wanted to bring a new freedom, a new openness for a universal society. New possibilities, untrammelled by the errors of the past, arise from this freedom.

Yet the new freedom brought about something less than had been hoped for. Once Islam was no longer persecuted, once the faith could stand in its own everydayness, life was different. Even religion itself was different. The Badr scene is a case in point. Once religious freedom was no longer threatened, people could go about business just as they did before, and be just as haltingly human as they had been. Muslim memory tells us the believers fought over spoils of that ugly battle (Ibn Ishāq 321-323).

Freedom thus brought with it opportunity, even the opportunity to turn away; memory says the Prophet blamed the losses of Uhud on sin among them: "a catastrophe befell you in the death of your brethren because of your sins...you brought it upon yourselves" (399). The new language of the faith was pressed into service to cover the normal human failings—greed, competition, avarice—a freedom to be human that did not exist before the new order was in place. They were now free to be themselves and to engage themselves in the more mundane aspirations of personal aggrandizement. A terrible personal responsibility was laid upon members of the community by this new freedom.

The impact of this on public thinking is evident in many ways, but one *hadith* gives a clue: Aisha is approached by a Quraishi woman who very shyly enquires if

she can find out for her how she is to clean herself after her period. The reticence of the woman in talking to the Prophet causes Aisha to comment, "The best women are the women of the *ansār*, because they have no hesitation in learning about religion" (from the Prophet), in effect recognizing that women in Medina had a new status that allowed them to talk openly about personal matters that would not have been allowed in Mecca (Ibn Hanbal, 1978, #23890). Freedom brought with it a new potential for equality and articulation. This would seem to apply particularly to women.

CANADIAN THEMES OF FREEDOM

In what follows, we examine poetry and specifically poetry by *rihla* women, since Canadians generally hold that their society provides a kind of freedom to women unmatched by many of the immigrants' countries. Living in Canada should then provide the vaunted freedom pursued by many people under strict regimes.

Syeda Nuzhat Siddiqui retains the idealism of the Prophet's early community, a community that reached for fundamental connection through values.¹⁵

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Even though our colours and our names
are not the same
even though our lands
lay asunder
and the space above us is victim
of plunder
we still are of one
human clan
Dreams of peace, truth and love
of breaking shackles
spreading our wings soaring high in the sky
our dreams are the same (Siddiqui 225, 227)

For some Muslim women, migration brings a new freedom of expression, much like the Medinan women. In Canada, the women discover the possibility of writing themselves into existence in a way they never could before. Thus Fauzia Rafiq writes of feminine instincts as a memory that brought her into being:

woman-memory (characteristic: womb-protection)
buried deep
inside the skull
unshed tears
gathering heat
heat, burn
burning
desire (Rafiq 190)

while Zara Suleman explicitly celebrates homosexuality¹⁶ in her poem "The Curve":

every curve, wanting to conform
to every curve,
wanting every curve
of yours next to
mine. (Suleman 191-192)

And revolted by the ugly racism of her Canadian fellow students, Sherazad Jamal turns in memory to religion, the great solace of her people:

There is nothing reasonable about this situation.
We learn gradually to cope, we have each other
our communal bonds, our religion we have become
more religious, more traditional than ever back home
to block the pain of our differences by embracing it
strength seems to come from
our collective invocation to Allah. (Jamal 127)

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And so, as these women tell us, the new freedom is not absolute freedom, any more than it was in the days of the Prophet, but rather is another kind of freedom and another kind of bondage. These poetesses affirm the theme of liberation that comes with migration, and detail the shock of prejudice that becoming Canadians visits upon them. They reflect the noble experience of freedom, and the trauma of disappointment.

RIHLA'S LEFTOVERS: JAHILIYYA CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE RADICAL

The Religio-cultural Template: With the Prophet's coming, a new consciousness developed, one element of which was a vigorous rejection of the past and an affirmation of the new. Much of his early career was spent trying to convince Meccans that his new order challenged the traditions of the fathers because the fathers had forgotten the true message. The Meccans, for their part, could see no sense in such a radical break with the past. Muhammad tried a compromise. The famous Satanic verses arose because Muhammad genuinely wanted to bring his Meccan friends and relatives into the fold, thus blurring the line between *jahiliyya* and Islam. God sent him a message:

If We (God) had not strengthened you, you would have almost have bent somewhat towards them. In which case, we would have made you to taste an identical measure (of punishment?) in this life, and an identical measure after death. Furthermore, you would have found nobody to help you against us. (17:76f)

Jahiliyya for ever after was a term of derision and perfidity, referring to a time past that should forever remain un-remembered, save as that which is not Islam. Hence in

the heart of the Islamic belief is an ambivalence about the past, for Muslim traditions of its past are to be acted upon, while anything of *jahiliyya* is forbidden. How is one to distinguish the two?

For the Prophet, there was no doubt: a radical cut from the past, and an affirmation of a new message from beyond. His religious experience lifted him beyond the trauma of stepping outside the comfortable confinements of the old. The juxtaposing of new, authoritative experience and the un-remembering of his past experiences bequeathed a liminality to life. Muslims have within the model life a betwixt and between-ness. The embrace of the Prophet of the radically new and the emphatic rejection of the old proposed a dramatically different way to live a journey out of one cultural terrain into a wholly new one, and to raise this to the paradigmatic.

CANADIAN EMBRACE OF THE NEW

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For an Islamicate example of cultural memory apart from religious commitment, we turn to the immigrant writing of Saad Elkhadem, an Egyptian Copt. He represents one whose journey radically rejected old pathways: he is regarded by some as the leading representative of the movement from classical realism to avant-garde in Egyptian literature (see Hellmuth, 1982; El-Gabalaway, 1988, 1-9).¹⁷ He ranges widely among themes favoured by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Jean-Paul Sartre and other modernists (El-Gabalaway, 1988, 1). Many of his books and short stories have been translated by himself or his colleague, formerly at the University of Calgary, Saad El-Gabalawy.

In the *Ulysses Trilogy*, Elkhadem builds his Ulysses character around the journeyings of the Homeric Odyssey, with his quest less a striving to return home than to find his way through the labyrinthine experiences of life. Yet some of his experiences are of a bizarre nature: as Ulysses the sailor, he is on shore from his boat, when he is signed to teach literature at an all-girls school in Australia on the basis of a raging drinking bout with the principal of the school, and then purloins that into a false university degree and a job at a California university (54). In *Crash Landing of the Flying Egyptian*, the artist-hero/anti-hero is poised to challenge the conservative religious views of the past, prefigured in his father. Advancing towards the hall where his father held forth with his devotees, he fortified himself with wine, then collapsed as he strode to confront the old man. Bundled off to the hospital, the doctor said he must have a diseased appendix to have acted thus, so out comes the offending organ. The experience generates further antagonism to his father's ancient rigid religion, raising it to a festering sore. Sending a love letter to the girl next door, the letter fell into her father's hands. The outraged patriarch complained to the protagonist's religious father and brought hell-fire upon him: the old man tied him to the bed, heated a skew and drove it into his thigh so that he could "taste hell," justifying his violence

with “kids are devils and bastards deserve to have their necks broken” (1992, 16). Immigrating to Canada, bouncing from one broken relationship to another, brutally disposing of women along the way, he eventually crashed from the whiplash of false hopes. Canada would not see its evils: the racism, the indifference, the permanent stain that being an immigrant blotted him and drained him dry. There was nowhere to go. There was nothing left. He raved:

I felt my spine bending and twisting, then melting and collapsing...I found myself slipping, quietly and slowly to the floor in total silence...I felt hot blood boiling in my cold veins, then spouting out of my closed mouth, nose, and ears...I lost control of my body, nerves, eyes, and emotions...I kept crying, gasping, and vomiting on my lap and urinating on my legs...like a frightened puppy or a wet bird or a sick infant...the next morning when I regained consciousness and recalled what had happened, I realized that the gods of the heavens and the demons of the earth had ganged up on me while I was unconscious, cut off my testicles, and sucked out the marrow of my manhood, depriving me of my last hope for immortality and eternal life. (1988, 29)

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Here was the ultimate end of one who embarked on the journey, but found no guidelines to carry him through the new terrain. Sick when he confronted the hide-bound religion of his father, he is, in Kierkegaard's words, ‘sick unto death’ when the journey brings him no deliverance, no new life. Such a radical rejection of the culture of his upbringing, and without the vision of a new community, he becomes a lost soul.

Elkhadem's work is an impressive example of how Islamically-generated literary themes are embedded in Middle Eastern consciousness, for here is an Egyptian Copt offering an Islamic ‘memory inset.’ He writes as one who has no message, but is conscious of a *jahiliyya* but cannot distinguish between *jahiliyya* and the new truth and has no way of knowing which is *jahiliyya* and which Islam. It is, incidentally, the cusp of the problem as the so-called fundamentalists see it. For, drawing from Sayyid Qutb, they have rejected the syncretism of the early Islamic period, and substituted for it a vision of a purified Islam that will have nothing to do with *jahiliyya* (Haddad, 1983).

Elkhadem's radical view paints a *jahiliyya* in an authentic manner, but has no the hope of moving beyond it, and cannot find it through journeyings. Such a person is, as his father held, damned. With Fanon, such people are ‘the wretched of the earth.’ El-Gabalawy notes that the Flying Egyptian writings are marked by ‘a nihilistic spirit of cynicism and a compulsive need to devastate all sacrosanct idols of moral behaviour’ (1988, iv). This is a culture without any soul, an environment so blind it is unable to renew itself. Elkhadem has painted a chilling portrait of the contemporary experience of lived *jahiliyya*.

But the very sense of despair, and the plea for the lasting and the meaningful, indicates that the author is not just content to destroy; he desperately wants out of situations that cause pain, and away from the pain that he has caused. Hence the journey is as much a fleeing from as a voyaging to.

This consciousness of the *jahiliyya* nature of the world, whether Egyptian/Islamic or Canadian, propels him ever more towards the new and ‘more real.’ For the writer is striving to give shape to what really is, even if people do not like what it is seen to be. Elkhadem does not turn the views of the minority into the heroic, even as Muhammad did not laud the *umma* just because believers said they were Muslim in the struggling days of the Medinan wars. The writer sees the problem as fundamental to humans and power:

Minorities always try to distinguish themselves from customs around them which are alien to their sensibility, to surpass the civilizations surrounding them which are removed from their history and culture. But no sooner do weak minorities turn into overwhelming majorities than they become infected with the germs of indolence, arrogance, and false pride. And without knowing it, the energetic, ambitious, and struggling minorities suddenly find themselves transformed into supersensitive people taking pride in their past achievements, and pleased with themselves to the point of folly and insolence. (1988, 27)

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Thus Elkhadem's radical rejections see no easy way out through post-colonial vendettas. It is too trite to point fingers at the conqueror while seeking solace in the togetherness of injury. His hero cannot accept such half-measures. He drinks deeply from all the prevailing fountains, and finds all of them wanting. What he wants is complete escape from the scourges of Canadian *jahiliyya*.

RIHLA GENRE: MEMORY AND THE CANADIAN CASE

The Middle Eastern literary *rihla* imagination, resting as it does upon the early literature of Prophetic migration, shows that memory, both explicit and implicit, draws upon many of the themes embedded in Muslim religious literature for its inspiration. It also demonstrates how the traditional *hijra-complex* continues to be reflected in the writings of the immigrant Canadian authors, even those who are not Muslim and those scarcely Middle Eastern in outlook. Moreover, the nuances of the Canadian *rihla* literature encompass many of the common themes of recent Western writing, themes like cultural conflict, alienation, exile, freedom of expression and radical rejection.

The contemporary *rihla* material in Canada provides some evidence for Girard's mimetic theory, since the immigrants do not encounter a new migratory experience as a raw, uncharted voyage, unrelated and unknown, but rather respond to new situations by turning back to the roots of their collective memories. Thus those structures that have been collectively valued in Middle Eastern tradition are given new life as ways of adapting to and modifying the host cultures. They operate as a type of memory inset, a continuing code by which the realities of experience are shaped and comprehended. While the nature of these valued patterns is unclear, they obviously relate to nonnative Muslim perceptions of the past. They have the character of

a paradigm about them, but there are no evident processes to determine when and how they should be applied. Rather, life is read through them as a way of testing the meaning of its experience. The reading itself is a creative endeavor allowing the narrator to organize recollections under the guidance of several templates. What seems significant is that collectively, these templates provide a sense of cultural order and legitimacy.

Likewise, our study allows us to understand *rihla* discourse as an occasion for self-knowledge and discovery, an encounter with the cultural memory of Middle Easterners that engages with some of their most profound cultural memories (Ghazi, 1981).¹⁸ Like the writings of their earlier traveling colleagues of many centuries ago, these authors not only enlighten us about their experience of migration, but open up to us a creative vein of this literature. They thus promise to enrich the Canadian psyche. For, at the very least, the memories enshrined in these works reach Canada now from all around the world, where they have become part of a new collective memory—that of all Canadians. Just how deeply, and in what way they will affect the larger trends in Canadian literature may not be clear, but it is evident that they suggest cultural influences far from the European norm.

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ENDNOTES

1. The term was developed by the late Islamic historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson in his classic *The Venture of Islam* (I, 57-60), as a way of indicating the cultural context within which both Muslims and other religious groups lived and thrived.
2. *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (Broadhurst, 1952) provides a lively account of a Spanish Muslim pilgrim who details his journey from Granada to Mecca and on to lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Insight into how inventive this material can be in understanding the Muslim world can be gleaned from Dunn (1986). Ibn Battuta was an inveterate traveler who wrote several volumes about his travels.
3. As is found in Ibn Ishāq's *Sir'at Rasūl Allah* and the collections of the *ḥadīth* (usually translated as *traditions*), both of which represent the collective memory of the early Muslim community.
4. As, for example, 'I have left among you the Book of God and if you hold fast to it you will never go astray.' This is part of the famous farewell speech. See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*. II, 616.
5. We are now aware that history is no longer a paradigmatic category of understanding, but really only the application of a formal pattern linking fields of inquiry and domains of names. The challenge to formal historical studies was White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* in which the problems of writing history dissolved into issues of representation. The issues around this topic are explored in two fine collections, that of *The New Historicism*, edited by Veese; and the volume by Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Without exploring all the implications of this 'movement, what I wish to stress here is that when Muslims engage in articulating their religious character, indeed, try to express emotional and personal ideal states, the model of the Prophet inevitably is present, either explicitly, as in remembering *ḥadīth*, or implicitly, as in

recalling how someone in authority (like a parent) raised the Prophet to an epic figure during the process of chiding children about their behaviour.

6. A malevolent spirit present since pre-Islamic times and taken up in Islamic writings and popular belief.
 7. I have often wondered whether the Jewish tribes in Medina felt they were now part of a colonial regime, expressing the same militancy as the fundamentalists do today, following Bilgrami's statement: "a good deal of Islamic revivalism in various countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, not to mention some of the northern cities of England, is the product of a long colonial and postcolonial history, which has shaped a community's perception of itself in terms of the Other" (Bilgrami 832).
 8. A Jewish convert to Islam seems to have set the tone for the antagonism with, "The Jews are a nation of liars." (Ibn Ishâq 241).
 9. There are some travels in life that seem to call for a stripping away of what is unnecessary. Pierre E. Trudeau, Canadian intellectual and former prime minister, found his revelatory travel to be in a canoe: "The impossibility of scandal creates a new morality, and prayer becomes a friendly chiding of the divinity, who has again become part of our everyday affairs" (Trudeau 10).
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9. Guillaume translates this 'room' as *castle*, while mentioning room as an alternate reading. I think room is closer to the intention of the poem. Later, the doubts abound: at Uhud, Mu'talib decried that they had believed the Prophet that things were going to be better in Yathrib, and now they faced being killed. "It was he who said on the days of the Parties, 'Muhammad promises us that we shall enjoy the treasures of Chosroes and Ceasar whereas it is not safe for one of us to go to the privy.'" (Ibn Ishâq 243).
 10. The role of omens is important in this period (Ibn Ishâq 177). The comfort of such dreams is not a theme in contemporary Muslim writers, although it may still be present.
 11. This has been cogently argued by my colleague Francis Landy, 1983.
 12. Among her writings are several in French, of which *L'Oiseau de fer: Cinq nouvelles* (1980) might be the best known.
 13. Expatriates return home, sometimes to stay, often to wrestle with "the echo of my genesis / An expatriate's answered prayers" as Kaul puts it. He had scarcely been home when conflict sets in:

But the chilling vision shattered the trip down the childhood,
Kashmiris living in the fossilized glory of the past,
Apathy their unshakeable reed,
Cynicism their only energetic hope,
Living between tyranny and anarchy of political pendulum. (Kaul, 1987, 13)
 15. The problematic of what constitutes Muslim identity is a long-standing debate within Islam. Fazlur Rahman grounds Muslim unity in the Qur'an, arguing that its message is consistent and totally integral (Fazlur Rahman, 1982, 159-161). Bilgrami, for one, thinks this misplaced, and sees this as continuation of an absolutist tradition that cannot be reformed (840).
 16. The issue of sexual repression among Muslim women has a long and complicated history. Part of it surely arose out of the colonial and post-colonial critique of Muslim society by Westerners. An analysis from the literary perspective can be found in Accad (1978, 617-628).
 17. This evaluation is found in Hellmuth, 1982, and El-Gabalaway, 1988, 1-9.
 18. Ghazi's book is a rather pious expression of migration's meaning, but it does register some of the crucial religious perceptions which many Muslims embrace.