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## Rereading ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ in Tariq Ali’s *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*

**Abstract** *This article reflects Tariq Ali’s efforts to understand the reality of the myth of ‘the clash of civilizations’ as a socio-materialist scientist to metabolize compellingly inter-connected dimensions of historical ‘reality’. The deconstruction of the historic reality provides us with a new prism to view the world from different perspectives, looking at new directions in the politico-historic enterprise. West has had a long tradition of misinterpreting the Crusades as holy wars were meant for the glorification of Christian divine faith, and they have become a metaphor for blessing humanity with West’s superior moral values against the ‘horror’ of Islam. Western academia has been promoting this deceptive view of two ‘incommensurable’ civilizations. Huntington stretches this view to develop his philosophy of ‘the clash of civilizations’. Tariq Ali is a Marxist socialist who interprets the Spanish history and rewrites the history of the Muslims’ relationship and the Christians from a materialist perspective to disprove Huntington’s thesis that Islam and Christianity are inherently incompatible for peaceful coexistence because of their totalizing teleological claims. Ali’s Islam Quintet, a sequence of five novels, exposes the imperialist agenda behind the clash theory. This article analyzes *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, the first novel of Ali’s Islam Quintet, to evaluate Ali’s critique of the clash of civilizations.*

**Key Words:** Islam, Christianity, Crusades, Judaism, Clash of Civilizations

### Introduction

Islam and the West have been entangled in 14 centuries-long histories varying from confrontational to peaceful co-existence, from rivalry to cultural exchange. The hostility goes back to the emergence of Islam as a politico-military force. Savory (1976) observes that Christendom has always viewed Islam as a threatening challenge since its revelation in 7th c AD. As Islam started capturing Christian regions in the 7th and 8th centuries onwards in Syria and Spain, the West was introduced to multi-religious peaceful coexistence, which ended with the Christian reconquest of Spain in 1492. The Crusades were initiated in 1095 to counter the threat of Islam and Jerusalem fell recovered by Salah-ud-Din in 1187. However, crusades were sustained till 1396—the Ottomans’ capturing of Constantinople in 1493 secured Islam and its central places. After the decline of the Muslim empires, Western imperialism dominated the Muslim world. In the 20th c, the creation of Israel sowed the seeds of eternal rivalry between Islam and Zionism. 9/11 signified the climax of the Islam-West confrontation and America responded to it through invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

During the Gulf War, the Arabs did not have a political culture. The era, therefore, publicized the misrepresentation of Islamic values. Ali who was inspired to explore the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the medieval age wrote Islam Quintet to retrieve the facts of what happened to Islam and the robust Muslim culture in Europe and thus clarified a cathartic effect upon disturbance and frustration of many who were angered at the gross misrepresentation of Islam as having no political culture. Fulfilling the demand of a social scientist researcher to make an objective sense of the exciting historiographic project that confronted him, Ali travelled to Spain to research this issue and produced his first novel. In an interview, he explained his motive for writing his novels: to make Muslims aware of their cultural history, to make it part of the academic talk, and to show the other side of Islam in Spain, Sicily and Turkey in the Crusades (Sahi, 2007). His research on Islamic history also inspired a movie: Islam in Spain: The Final Solution. He has used fiction to reconstruct Muslim history to retrieve what is not available or is hidden. Commenting upon the strong tendency among

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the West (Christian) to malign Islam and the Muslims, Ali told [David Barsamian \(2005\)](#) that the mutual relationship among Islam, Christianity and Judaism what he found in the history of the Iberian Peninsula was the politest mechanism, and it was Catholic fundamentalism that destroyed the peaceful co-existence by othering and annihilating Islam and Judaism. This article delimits itself to studying the dynamics of the West's politico-ideological gaze towards Islam via Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (2000), to explain how, in the 15th c, the Moorish Spain after the Granada's fall and becoming the territory of the Catholic Christians gave rise to hydra-headed clashes culminating in all sorts of political, religious and ideological crisis between the Muslims and the Christian world.

### Literature Review

To advocate inter-faith harmony and dialogue and stressing commonalities between Judaism, Islam and Christianity for inter-faith harmony and dialogue, [Karen Armstrong \(2001\)](#) observe that the holy wars led to the conflict among the three Abrahamic religions-Christianity, Judaism and Islam. She sees that in the Crusades "religion at its very worst" that have led to the Middle East crisis and today's Islam-West hostility. [Maalouf \(1994\)](#) also echoes the same view that the clash between the East and the West dates back to the Crusades ([Ali, 2003](#)). [Nawwab \(2001\)](#), while studying the materialist aspects of the Crusades, discusses the inseparability of religious zeal and politico-economic concerns. Hence, to him, the encounter between the Muslims and the Christians was often utilized for politico-economic purposes ([Nawwab, 2001, p. 7](#)). [Savory \(1976\)](#) also concludes that the economy was the root cause of the First Crusade. [Irwin \(1997\)](#) analyzes Scott's *The Talisman* (1825) regarding Crusades and argues that Kenneth, a Scottish knight, ventures into the third Crusade, befriends Saladin, woos a kinfolk of Richard, the Lion-Heart, and protects the King. Scott's *The Talisman* is the Western perspective inspired by Byron, Hope and Morier, but despite his romanticism, he regrets the Crusades as "religious fanaticism and human folly" (p. 141). [Said \(2016\)](#) critiques how *The Talisman*, a specimen of what he terms "orientalist discourse" orientalizes Saladin's race as descendants of Lucifer (p. 101). [Irwin \(1997\)](#) argues that Saladin condemns both the imperialist crusaders and Richard's annihilation "of Muslim hostages" (p. 142). He explains a materialistic view of the 12th c religious rivalry of the Crescent and the Cross. He presents Saladin as an embodiment of chivalry, rather than Islam.

In his memoir, *Leo, the African* (1988), Amin Maalouf presents the quests of Hassan al Wazzan, a 16th-century Arab traveler. He depicts the social tolerance in the multiethnic and multi-religious society of Andalusian Spain and enlists internal causes for the Muslim downfall. He conforms to and strengthens Ali's findings that the Muslims and the Jews had a friendly history and suffered equally in the reign of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Both Scott and Henty seem to work on an agenda; Maalouf does not. In *Islam Quintet* – an exploration of the conflict between the Muslim and Christian civilizations – Ali argues the Western view of Islam as an immovable religion without culture is highly misleading, resulting from a paranoiac approach of the Christian intellectuals. Conversely, he highlights the Muslim involvements in the revitalization and the modernization of the West. This article views Ali's expression of the enormity of Islam's impact on the past 14 centuries. Ali's analysis deconstructs the negative perception of Muslims by Christianity and affirms that Islam upheld the virtues of knowledge and tolerance despite Christianity's focus on hostility.

### Theoretical Framework

[Huntington \(2011\)](#) accepts that the Muslim-Christians conflict of two civilizations has its reasons like the two religions (p. 212). He thinks that religious differences will spell the clash in the post-Cold War era. He argues that the civilizational conflicts among Islam and the Christians/West, Jews date back to Islam's early victories in Europe, its removal after the decline of Granada (1492), the Ottoman invasions on the Eastern part of Europe and Vienna, and the downfall of the Ottoman Kingdom in the early 20th century. He enumerates the following similarities between Islam and Christianity as the basis of the clash: both are missionary religions seeking the conversion of others, both claiming the universality of their religions and both being teleological faiths. Huntington believes that the conflict between religions is not transitory; its roots lie in "the nature of two religions" pervading the two civilizations (p. 210). The orientalist views of Huntington and Co. are based upon the sweeping understanding of 14 centuries of troubled relations.

Movements of Islamic resurgence in many countries and the rise of the Muslim population in Europe and America are recent causes of the clash. Also, Huntington views the conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic as the goriest clash in the 21st century. Western civilization has its Judeo-Christian roots incompatible with Muslim culture, the only potential threat to the West. The reasons for conflict are far more pervasive than merely America symbolizing the Christian superpower; instead, it is the two people's faith in the universality of their religion and superiority in their cultural value system that fuels the Islam/West rivalry (Huntington, 2011, pp. 217-18). Lewis (1990) observes that for about ten centuries, from the first arrival of Islam in Spain to the second Turkish siege of Vienna, Islam has been a threat to Europe (p. 210). He views the present mood as a reaction to West's "Judeo-Christian heritage, [its] secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both" (Huntington, p. 213). For Lewis, the present backwardness of the Muslim world is the result of Islam as religion and culture, not a colonial legacy.

Esposito, Halliday and Chomsky present an anti-thesis to this clash theory. Esposito (1999) questions whether the collision between Islam and the West is inevitable. His answer is negative, and the response, he feels, should arise from understanding the Muslim world. Halliday (1996) rejects Huntington's theory as a myth because Islam is a bygone issue incapable to cope with the contemporary realities. Halliday theorizes that two groups favor the clash theory: one that needs a new enemy after communism and the fallacious Muslims who believe that they can challenge the Western power. Noam Chomsky (2006) exposes the duplicity of the US foreign policy, one for 'us'/'US' and the other for 'them': America preaches democracy and freedom for all, but promotes non-democratic forces for others. He considers Iraq-war a strategy to capture the second-largest oil reserves in the world (Chomsky, 2008). He opines that Huntington's coinage of "the clash of civilizations" had its roots in his "bitter hatred for Islam." Esposito and Halliday, however, demolish the clash myth on the basis that Islam being divided in multiple ways with its glorious past left far behind poses no threat to the West. Chomsky's analysis of the Iraq war is that it does not prove the philosophy of 'the clash of civilizations' because he observes, Iraq's people are an enlightened liberal nation. The US and UK do not, in his analysis, follow their professed ideals. Instead, the United States of American is the primary state that unleashes terrorism in the world (Sayeed, 2006). Ali's presentation of the secular side of the clash debunks Huntington's view of clash emerging from the nature of Islam and Christianity.

### Rereading 'the Clash of Civilizations' in Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree

Tariq Ali (2000, 2003), a Marxist-socialist, reconstructs the account of the simmering tensions between Muslims-Christians in terms of a class struggle between two different ideologies competing for material resources and power. As a Marxist historian, he views the present as the product of historical progressions. Ali (2003) catches a fundamental contradiction in Huntington's simplistic notion of 'war of civilizations': Muslims fight among themselves oftener than do the peoples of other civilizations (p. 308). Ali regards the present clash and the hydra-headed 'war on terror' in political and economic terms, a conflict between American capitalist imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, resulting from American intervention in the Muslim world. In the past, Ali observes, the clash was between Muslim secular imperialism and Christian fundamentalism, which waged the 'holy' wars of Crusades to save the falling Byzantium Empire. Both religious ideologies were propelled by economic compulsions, says Ali. Ali believes that Islam's Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) greatly influenced the political movement for the tribal confederation and socio-economic empowerment of the Arab tribes. Only the promises of paradisiacal happiness cannot explain the fervent unity of the Arabs; it must have been worldly gains that motivated thousands to fight under Khalid ibn al-Walid for the takeover of Damascus (Ali, 2003, p. 32).

Ali castoffs Huntington's interpretation of the clash because civilizations do not exist individually; they exchange value systems and substantial resources, leading to cultural evolution continuity. He doesn't feel satisfied with any such simplistic explanation of the politico-religious conflicts between Islam and Christianity that exclude economic and material dimensions of the 'clash' and consider war a Muslim/West specific phenomenon. Instead of believing in this monolithic version of Islam associated with wars, he contends every other society has felt the heat of battle (Ali, 2003, p. 300). In

the medieval age, Muslims were far ahead of the West in every field of life, and they shared all their progress and knowledge with the West wallowing in the dark ages then. They roofed the breach between the Greek civilization and modern science and thereby paved the way for the European renaissance. Hence, Islam is not a monolithic religion, he argues. Its give-and-take relationship with other civilizations has spelled its evolution through history: the Arab conquest of Persia and Syria founded the new Islamic advancement that developed cultural synthesis by absorbing Hellenistic culture (p. 33). Opposing approaches in all three divine religions refute the monolithic nature of faith and Islam is no exception; it always flourished through interaction with other civilizations. "Its origins lay in close contact with Judaism and Christianity" (p. 38). *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (2000) demonstrate the Church's lust for wealth and nobility's lust for power and manipulation of fundamentalist factors in Christianity for material motives, the connivance that barred peaceful coexistence of the three religions. Queen Isabella, in alliance with the Catholic Church, annihilated a culture remarkable for its secular tolerance. The novel is set in the Moorish Spain of the late 15th c when Granada falls to the dominant Christians who crushed the dominated Muslims to build an intolerant Christian monarchy. Entrusting the pigeon flock to a cat, Isabella appoints Ximenes, the Archbishop of Granada, to initiate Muslims' worst time in the region and establish and consolidate Christian absolutism power. The Muslims are given three choices: conversion to Christianity, compulsive departure, genocide. In the latter two cases, their properties and lands were to go to the Church. In Banu Hudayl, the rural community that makes the background of the delimited novel, Muslims are in this dilemma. Umar bin Abdallah, the village noble and a successor of Ibn Farid, is in a fix about saving his people's lives and property.

Miguel – Umar's Uncle (Umar's father's Step-brother) – is himself a convert and is now advised by the Cordoba's Archbishop to embrace Christianity again, the only way to secure his life, family and property. He also wishes Hind (Umar's daughter) to marry Juan, his (Miguel's) ugly fat son. The purpose of this move is to safeguard Umar's family and property but Umar, despite his concern for the family, is not yet prepared for this move. Don Inigo, the mayor and the Captain-General of Granada, is a sincere family friend of Umar who advises him to choose Christianity because the time for Islam in the peninsula is over. The church, acting as a court, categorically decided to wipe Islam "from these lands forever" (Ali, 2000, p. 73). He advocates Umar that he and his family should immediately embrace Christianity, the only way to safeguard his clan. Hence, the conversion is not transcendental; it is political and substantial; the only escape for the Muslims of Spain. Captain-General argues that he is an essential entity for him: either to remain alive or dead and his family (p. 74). Umar declines the proposal because his family cannot convert.

Both the Queen and the Church exploit Ximenes' fanaticism that wins over to Christianity new converts, wealth and lands. Religion is a political and material toll in his hands, and he is also used as an instrument for eradicating the Muslim and Jewish population and culture for absolute politico-religious control over the Iberian Peninsula. Ximenes is a self-appointed representative of God and feels blessed at his position as the Muslims' executioner. And so is Isabella, who has replaced Archbishop Talavera with her like-minded inflexible fundamentalist Ximenes because the former is a tolerant temper insisting on peaceful coexistence with Muslims. She needs a sterner soul like hers and a committed priest. Ximenes is tailored that way (pp. 133-4). To get sanction for the persecution of the Muslims of Spain, he writes to the Queen. But instead of any desire for spiritual enlightenment of the 'sinful city' (Granada), he only uses political authority to confiscate the politically weaker community's property for the 'most Christian' King and Queen. He interprets the reconquest as a replacement of the Holy Father', 'a superior honorable entity' with Mahometans, heretics and blasphemers (Muslims) and their 'the poisonous doctrines' and their 'evil books'. He uses such religious oratory to induce the Queen's religious feelings to hire 'an apostolic Inquisitor' to persecute the false converts. Ximenes' suggestions and measures also openly violate the terms of surrender agreed with the Sultan at reconquest: i- permission to convert every Muslim; ii- ban on Arabic on public and private affairs; iii- ban on wearing traditional Moorish robes; iv- the destruction of public baths; v- ban on Islamic festivals and weddings. Ximenes' suggestions for the systematic annihilation of the Muslim faith and culture are meant for his political power of the Crown and cultural domination of the Church. He uses RAS at his disposal to destroy the ISA that his civilization cannot surpass.

Two Muslim brothers break away from the Church custody and get shelter in their mother's house to be secure against Christian atrocities. Ximenes sends a Bailiff to arrest them but is killed by the high-spirited Muslim mob. The Archbishop holds a meeting with the Captain-General to shape the dealings to govern the insurgents. The angry captain holds Ximenes accountable for the revolution. Ximenes is pleased to see this anarchy because it gives him a plea to resort to military action that will actualize his dream of inhuman persecution of the Muslims. The Captain-General orders the seizure of the stately evictor's assassin and declares that converts can keep their property and land and practice their culture and those who do not would be penalized. The tariffs on the followers are also doubled. He also takes the sons of the leading two hundred folks of Granada into his custody. Muslims almost became helpless: even in the case of conversion, the Holy Inquisition' takes hold of their assets with the charge of false conversions, and those who protest would be tortured to death.

*Banu Hudayl's* Muslims' massacre at the end of the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* affirms that making the Muslims converts is not what the Church pursues. When Banu Hudayl is surrounded, Umar's hypocrite steward, Ubaydallah – who has already abandoned Islam – lies to the Captain-General that the entire village is equipped to be Christian, but the Captain commands his soldiers to attack to wipe out everything “[the village] contains” (p. 258). The army attacked the armless people, and in this one-sided fight, the people of the entire village, including Umar's noble family are executed. The only survivor of the attack is the chief cook, Dwarf. Zuhayr's notelet to Hind also approves that the Church does not seek the transformation of the people from Islam to Christianity; they want their lands and properties. Abu Zaid al-Ma'ari argues: they need our wealth, not our souls; our death is the only way to get this purpose (p. 272).

Ximenes and the Queen's radicalism make the coexistence of three divine religions impossible. He goes one step ahead: he uses the Queen's name to decide the burning of the Muslims' books. He employs the state apparatuses, the army and the Inquisition to realize his fanatic plans. The Inquisition is the Church's instrument to persecute the Muslims and the Jews. The Captain-General has sympathies for the Muslims, but his will cannot prevail as a state servant. The lands, wealth and properties of the Muslims are seized by the Crown in the Church's name. It serves to amass huge wealth for the Church and the Crown: “They confiscated estates alone could fund three wars against the Turks,” says the Captain General (p. 68). Miguel also attempts to convince the Muslims of Banu Hudayl: “In the end, you will convert, but by then the Inquisition will be here, and they will question all of you to determine which conversion is true and which is false” (pp. 140-41). Zuhayr and his emotional Muslim friends are aware of Ximenes' designs of the Muslims' economic oppression, and therefore, they plan to resist against him. Ibn Basit, the herbalist's son, rightly exposes the materialist motives of the Church. Salman bin Mohammed's father says that even if they convert, they will devise other means of their property (p. 181). Muslims, too, are concerned only with securing their property. Umar prevents his son Zuhayr from fighting against the Christians: “They have taken power and authority away from us, but the estates are still intact. We can enjoy our wealth in peace in dignity. Why should al-Hudayl disturb the Castilians?” (pp. 148-9). Zuhayr has material, not spiritual, the reason for fighting because, for him, nothing matters more than “the safety of our home and the estates” (p. 149). For both Christians and Muslims, the property is essential, not faith. Muslims can compromise their faith, but they can convert or fight to the death when it comes to families, wealth and lands. Ali presents Islamic culture as tolerant and rational with material and political motives. Even Saladin used the idea of Jihad to unite politically divided Muslims against the Franks, whom he foresaw as a threat to the region's security. His repeated offerings of truce, kindness to the prisoners of war, and generosity to the Christians after recovering Jerusalem show that his purpose was peace and stability, not eliminating the non-Muslims. But Christian faith and Crown purported elimination of Muslim culture and population.

## Conclusion

*Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* demonstrates Queen Isabella and her confessor Ximenes' political and economic motives. The Catholics eradicated Muslims who were culturally superior. Sicily, a picture of multiethnic and multicultural coexistence, was destroyed by fundamentalist monks and greedy barons. Ali's thesis about the Islam/West clash is that it is a politico-economic conflict, not a



civilizational clash and religion is used on both sides for material reasons. This clash is not unavoidable; Muslims and Christians in the past have experienced peaceful coexistence. He demolishes Huntington's reductive nonsense about 'the clash of civilizations' thesis: Civilizations, whether Islamic or Western are not immovable entities. The conflicting dogmatic beliefs and contradictory value systems drive them ([Ali, 2003](#)). For him, neither Islam is monolithic nor is Christianity, and so is the case with Islamic and Christian civilizations. They have many diversities and inherent contradictions. Their history of cooperation, interaction and cultural and material give and take refutes the inevitability of the clash between the two entities.

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