

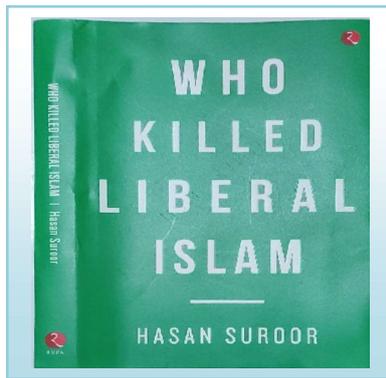
Received: 31st July, 2019Acceptance: 28th September, 2019Online Published: 30th September, 2019**BOOK REVIEW:****Author: V. Krishna Ananth***

Rakshanda Jalil, But You Don't Look Like a Muslim, Harper Collins, India, 2019 (Price Rs. 479/-)

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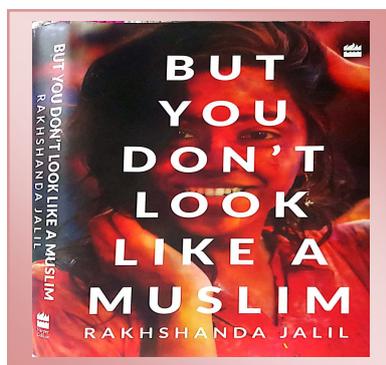
Hasan Suroor, Who Killed Liberal Islam, Rupa Publications, India, 2019 (Price Rs. 595/-)

When Samuel Huntington put out his thesis of a threat to the world from the World of Islam,



which he did some two decades ago, the liberals in the academia and elsewhere found the argument so horrible. Huntington himself in an interview to a journalist maintained he wished he would be proved wrong and that the world will escape such a clash of civilizations as he prophesized in his book then.

The world had witnessed the disastrous war between Iran and Iraq before that and also a lot of blood spilt in the battle between Zionism and Palestinian national liberation. Huntington's book had come out after the Soviet Union had collapsed and along with it a reality – the socialist bloc – which some had held a hope for the future that was egalitarian as much as it was secular. The Taliban had pounded the Bamiyan Buddhas and 'restored' Afghanistan into an abyss. And the petro-dollar funded Saudi Arabia version of Islam was on the rise alongside Iran led by the Khomeini.



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It called for a lot of idealism and to be as unrealistic as one could to proclaim Huntington off the mark. But then it is not necessary to be realistic in order to dream. And there were many like me in our midst in India then who had refused to realise that India too was in transition where the space for the quintessential ‘liberal’ was shrinking. Or, let me put it another way: These were, perhaps, the last days for a category of people to whom being liberal meant not to be part of any religion or such other denominational identity.

Hasan Suroor, then was one of those. He was among those Indian Muslims who would have looked for a third option (if he was a man over 21 years of age in 1947) other than staying on in India (that his parents did chose to) or going to Pakistan as did some others then. Hasan Suroor would have asked for a third option: To go to England. England, even in the 1990s looked a place where the wonderful ideas of the Enlightenment era had survived and even developed into an extremely liberal form.

Hasan Suroor did realise his dreams sometime in the late 1990s. To go and live there in London and he opted, when he could, to stay on in London. And his book, detailing whatever happened to liberal Islam instead of what could have happened is both anecdotal and argumentative. In both these, Hasan Suroor gyrates around his own self, showing himself a mirror and argues, fervently, to liberate Islam from its scriptures and the ‘liberal’ in a sense cannot but be irreverent towards religion. The revolt to liberate, Hasan seems to suggest, is as much metaphysical as is religion in general and Islam in particular.

Rakshanda Jalil, almost a decade younger than Hasan Suroor is also part of another kind of liberal and the only thing common between the two is both belong to the world that is necessarily cosmopolitan and pretty much urban. A world that the Mandi House circle in Lutyen’s Delhi symbolises; where something called a ‘composite culture’ used to be celebrated. I am not sure if Mandi House and the various art galleries around there are still what it used to be in the 1980s.

Jalil, unlike Suroor, is a believing Muslim and is proud that her father did not take the train to Pakistan. In this collection – But You Don’t Look Like a Muslim – being essays she had written for newsmagazines and web-sites over the years, Jalil does try to convey that Islam is not necessarily a religion steeped in the obscure and the imperative for the rest of Indian society, predominantly Hindu India, to recognise the insurgencies that sections within the



Muslim community have launched from within and make sure the devout are not pushed into the laps of the fundamentalists and groomed as one.

Her essays (and one would have comprehended them better if only the author and the publishers had carried short annotations on when and where they were first published) reflect the angst of being Muslim in India in the decades after December 6, 1992 and the increasing demonization of the Muslims in the media. Among them is Jalil's detailed comment on the sound and fury that marked the release of *Padmavat*, a film that should necessarily be put on the top of a list of bad cinema made in the last ten years, published then in *The Wire*.

There are also many anecdotal/autobiographical sketches of life in Delhi and around the Jamia Milia Islamia and on the tombs that dot Delhi. Jalil also delves, in some of these, on her own travels and travails to present us, readers, with what it means to be living the life of a believer in Islam and yet not accept the clergy and their orders. In other words, a liberal Muslim, that Hasan Suroor sets out in search of in his own way. The point is Hasan seeks to locate the liberal from among the atheists or the professional who dote the several IT parks and such other creatures of the liberalized post-modern world. Jalil, however, is not on such a chase and hence a lot more comfortable with whatever she is.

It may be that there is a crisis of the kind that Huntington predicted a couple of decades ago and that is real. And it, perhaps, has also pushed individuals and collectives from among the communities that are both in the margins somewhere and constitute the majority and hence dominant elsewhere to think aloud on the need to prove Huntington wrong. To make sure that civilizations co-exist and in communion rather than end up destroying one another in clashes. *Ijtihad* (an argumentative tradition) as the Prophet held out is what could mark this process of saving civilizations rather than *Hadiths*. Both Suroor and Jalil make this point their own way in their books.

The two books under review are important additions to a plethora that have already come out in our times. The tradition that Edward Said founded is no longer a mere pedantic exercise; Hasan Suroor and Rakshanda Jalil have added their bit to enrich this and as it ought to be from distinctly different perspectives and sometimes even from opposite ends in their attitude towards religion. Jalil and Suroor may not give us answers to the questions that are raised on whether religion and liberalism can co-exist; but reading these books will, for sure,



help us raising more questions than dishing out answers. This, indeed, is what good books ought to do to readers and hence we distinguish between good books and text books.

Suroor and Jalil, I will argue, have written what could be called good books.