In an article published in the *Mail & Guardian,* the winner of the inaugural European Union award for literature, Ishtiyaq Shukri, offered his views on global political developments in light of the then raging ‘cartoon debate’. His perspective on ‘Fortress Europe’, the fallacy of an ideal type European or Muslim identity, and the role of literature in shaping identity has strong resonance with writers of the early post-independence era who aimed to redefine what it meant to be ‘African’. His piece reminded me of two of my favourite literary moments from so-called ‘minority’ writers who grapple with the nexus between politics and identity. The first is V S Naipaul’s unlikely protagonist, Salim, chronicled in *A bend in the river,* who moves from the east coast of Africa into the interior during the first years of power of Africa’s ‘Big Men’, paralleling his own journey of identity as an African of Arab-Indian decent. There is a moment of great

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candour when Salim explains that the first time he took note of the dhow (boats) in his hometown was after they were pictured on a postage stamp during British colonial rule in Tanzania that described the boats as ‘Arab dhows’. He explains, “It was as though in those stamps a foreigner had said, ‘this is what is most striking about this place’ without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken them for granted”. What Salim expresses is an understanding of the power of ‘cultural distance’ but also of the way in which colonialism ascribed identity to that which should not have an ‘essential identity’.

The other is from Jamal Mahjoub’s part-Sudanese part-British protagonist, Yasin, in his acclaimed Travelling with Djinns, who explains: “[M]y history is not given, but has to be taken, reclaimed, piece by solitary piece, snatched from among the pillars of centuries, the shelves of ivory scholarship. My flimsy words set against those lumbering tomes bound in leather and written in blood.”

What both characters convey is the pure power of discourse. We are who we are because of who says what we are: a clear enough concept of sociological theory, an understanding of which, of course, formed much of the foundation for nationalist and anti-colonial strategies across the continent, including the pan-African and pan-Arab movements of the early 1960s. This is a ‘deconstruction of the ‘other’, if you will. So why is it that those nationalist or ethno-nationalist movements were unpacked for their ‘underlying’ motivations, like the call for substantive sovereignty and greater socio-economic equality, while, on the other hand, any debate that includes the word ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’ or ‘Arab’ takes the comfortable and bizarre form of engaging on the level of symbol rather than meaning? What constrains commentators from moving beyond the ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘Islam versus the West’ or ‘modern versus traditional’? Or even worse, what allows analysts to categorise types of Muslims as if they resembled a paint colour spectrum from mocha moderate to furnace fundamentalist, suggesting that there is something inherently wrong with Islam? This kind of categorisation means you are safe if you have escaped the colour brush of evil Islam by being a hyphenated ‘moderate-Muslim’, but not so if you are just simply ‘Muslim’.

The rigid subscription to something like anthropological emphasis on ‘variants’ of Islam like Wahhabism or Salafism actually belie the fundamental rejection of moving beyond the labels to an understanding of structural power relationships in national discourse. Surely, one cannot really look to an explanation of terrorism in the marginalised ‘breeding grounds’ of the failed states of Somalia or Afghanistan without considering the national issues and challenges to the realisation of domestic democracy. Pascal Menoret sums up this almost obsessive need to characterise the Muslim/Arab identity as either traditional or conservative, saying that “[a] conservative Saudi thus becomes a Bedouin or an Islamist, while a modern-minded Saudi will be a nouveau riche or a globalised capitalist … [T]hese readings [show] an impossibility that Saudi’s should think of themselves as Saudi.” The notion seems to be that any protests by a group of people against socio-economic grievances is seen to be legitimate, unless this group is
made predominantly of Muslims – then they are instantly framed through the lens of ethnicity and ‘irrational’ religious sentiment calling for the obligatory abuse of the term ‘Jihad’ in any explanation of such events.

Last year’s nation-wide protests in France aptly demonstrated the need to characterise opposition as irrational, emotional or ethnic rather than address the sense of disenfranchisement from the increasing imposition of neo-liberalism and the withdrawal of the state in providing security in social services.

The protestors were ‘immigrants’ or ‘ethnic minority’ or ‘marginalised Arabs’ not simply ‘French civil opposition’.

While it would be foolish to discount the role of the symbol in organising support for a particular cause – in this case the role of ‘Islamic-speak’ for motivating horrendous violence – such an overemphasis on stereotypical discourse has entrenched the medium as the message rather than deconstructing the power relations underpinning this language. Khadija Margardie, for example, argues that instead of protesting about the occupation of Palestine or domestic abuse, Muslims chose to protest about the cartoons. The point that there are ‘bigger’ issues out there is a relevant one, but by conflating, for example, the protestors and the people responsible for the killing of a Danish Muslim woman, she ignores the impact of the symbolic association of terrorism and Islam. It is as what the University of Pretoria’s Professor Jonathan Jansen has explained recently as a form of “humiliation through non-military means”. What is being argued is not a simple and unrewarding focus on the cartoons themselves but on the rejection of an imposed ‘terrorist’ identity on civil opposition. The cartoon debate illustrates the implicit inability of commentators and politicians to engage with oppositional movements in more than symbolic terms. More importantly, those regions where the protests turned violent are also the states with the highest level of state repression of democratic debate. Seen through this paradigm, the rallying around an endogenous form of organisation in Islam is not unusual or deviant, but a product of rising inequality and the closure of civil space.

There was an interesting dichotomy of themes at play at the first public debate on the cartoons in Europe organised by the Spanish-Turkish alliance of civilisations in Helsinki on 14 March. Certainly, the comments from the Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erkki Tuomioja, showed an appreciation of the doublespeak of human rights and violence by the West in engaging with the Middle East, his arguments nevertheless remained in the realm of the need for ‘dialogue’ between the West and a perceived unengaged ‘Muslim World’. Indeed, the idea that there should be more inter-faith cooperation between communities demonstrates once again the failure to move beyond the symbolic into the substantive realpolitik that drives foreign policy. Menoret challenges these comfortable positions by asking, “Why do we deny multiple-causality to the discourse of bin Laden, when everyone agrees that behind Bush’s discourse, real political, social or economic forces are giving it life?”
But the caricatures are just a small part of a continuum that has done little to distinguish between ‘Islamism’ and ‘Islam’, where the former takes on the language of the latter without the commitment to the underlying principles. Seen in this context ‘Islamism’ is an appropriation of the language of religion for the purpose of capturing the state. In this way, Muslim opposition movements to states that have adopted ‘Islamisation’ as statecraft to entrench themselves in power are then characterised as ‘super fundamentalists’ who would be dangerous if ever they came to power themselves. This point is clearly demonstrated in the case of Algeria and now Palestine, where democratically elected parties formed out of opposition to unaccountable regimes are quickly denounced on the basis of being anti-democratic (read Islamic). It seems to me to resemble the classic ‘stability over revolution’ formula that saw the hegemony of corrupt elites in the Middle East and Africa being supported by the Western allies as long as access to resources was not disrupted in any way: a case of ‘any ideology as long as it’s capitalist’.

Certainly there are those who, as the Islamic Movement of South Africa explains, feed into the discourse of ‘us and them’ to the extent that they articulate a jingoistic expression of Islam that exiles Muslims from the rest of humanity and confines itself in an ‘ultra-Muslim laager’. But I see these individuals as the sideshow to the central issue of homogenising opposition to what are obviously corrupt and despotic regimes. In his presentation in Helsinki, Francis Burgat encapsulated this all-encompassing ‘cultural’ imposition when he explained that rather than seeing the resurgence of ‘Islamic’ discourse as a form of endogenous civil society expression, the mere fact that it is expressed in Arabic, for example, is already interpreted as the language of ‘Islam’ or as speaking ‘Muslim’ and hence, to the non-Muslim observer, the antithesis of ‘modernity’.

For those who see in modernity only the reflection of ‘Western’ values and civilisation, the idea that social justice is perhaps the highest form of ‘modernity’ is quickly lost. Importantly, the failure to acknowledge that ‘tradition’ can be imported from the outside and that Islam can stand in opposition to invented tradition, as Menoret argues, reflects the poverty of so-called expert analysis. That the Islamic values being called for by civil grassroots movements emphasise the desire to see national economic sovereignty over the vast oil resources in the Middle East, to give but one example, is the real revolutionary speak which for current emperors is too dangerous to contemplate. They would far rather that Islam be associated and marginalised by identifying it with an ahistorical discourse that centres on the amputation of limbs and the veiling of women.

**Note**