# Cosmopolitanism and the Unfollowable Routines and Rituals in Ishtiyaq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret*

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## Summary

This article explores how Ishtiyaq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* critiques the limited and severely uneven forms of hospitality that characterise post-9/11 Britain. It also examines how the text gestures towards the possibility of a non-violent, inclusive cosmopolitanism. The piece begins by relating recent debates surrounding the "War on Terror", as well as Britain's decision to leave the European Union to the novel's major concerns. It then turns to the novel, and summarises incidents in which the principal character, Issa Shamshuddin, is traumatised and harmed by the Islamophobia and anti-immigration policies evident in the London portrayed in the text. Next, it turns to an analysis of the strange and irreproducible rituals of Issa's neighbour, Frances. The article concludes that that these unfollowable rituals posit how a truly cosmopolitan society would function.

## Opsomming

Die artikel ondersoek hoe Ishtiyaq Shukri se *The Silent Minaret* die beperkte en skerp ongelyke vorms van kulturele uitruiling wat post-9/11 Brittanje kenmerk kritiek sowel as hoe die teks die moontlikheid van ʼn meer nie-gewelddadige, inklusiewe kosmopolitisme daarstel. Dit begin deur die onlangse debatte rondom die "oorlog teen terreur" sowel as Brittanje se besluit om die Europese Unie te verlaat te verbind met voorvalle waarin die hoof karakter, Issa Shamshuddin, getroumatiseer en geskaad word deur die Moslemhaat en anti-immigrasie beleide in Londen soos wat dit in die roman uitgebeeld word. The artikel beweeg dan na ʼn ontleding van die eienaardige en onreproduseerbare rituele van Issa se buurvrou, Frances. Ten slotte argumenteer die artikel dat die onnavolgbare rituele suggereer hoe ʼn ware kosmopolitiese samelewing sou funksioneer.

Issa Shamshuddin is a vanished hero, and an absent protagonist. The reader of *The Silent Minaret* conducts a futile search for him in the text, just as his family does (2005). Even in the few sections of the novel in which his loved ones recall their time with him, Issa is depicted as quiet, reserved, and, at times, absurdly obtuse. For a time during the late stages of apartheid, he is a

*JLS/TLW 33(1), March/Maart 2017*
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2017.11763

cadre of the United Democratic Front. He subsequently moves to London to complete a PhD on the cosmopolitan nature of the early Cape settlement, as well as the measures taken by the colonial government to eradicate such cross-cultural interactions, and wipe the historical record of their existence. While there, he is horrified by the sense that similar structures and policies are being utilised by the allied West in its "War on Terror". The invasion of Afghanistan confirms, for him, that the justifications used by empire have not changed substantially since the first years of colonialism, that historical discourse is still at the service of the dominant culture, and that marginalised people therefore continue to be excluded from the so-called master-narrative. As a result, such people are no longer afforded the status of human; instead, they are rendered invisible and thereby made more susceptible to violence (Butler 2004: ii). The great 'cosmopolitan' centres of the West, such as London, are critiqued in the text because recognition, citizenship and hospitality are unevenly distributed within their borders. It is for this reason that Jane Poyner, following Paul Gilroy, argues that George W. Bush and Tony Blair's "War on Terror" is itself "a 'quasi' armoured mode of cosmopolitanism" which entrenches racial lines, and uses the language of humanism and cosmopolitanism to justify military and political interventions such as the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (2011: 319).

After Issa witnesses a mosque being desecrated by British police supposedly looking for terrorists, he disappears. In fact, in the present tense of the novel he is already gone and his character is only revealed through the recollections of his friends Katinka and Frances, his mother Vasinthe, and his brother Kagiso, who (along with his other mother Ma Gloria) became an adopted member of the family on the day Issa was born.

The novel resembles a detective story, as it follows those left behind while they search for their missing loved one (Steiner 2007: 59). But unlike the conventional detective narrative, *The Silent Minaret* does not come to an easy conclusion, and the mystery is not solved. The attendant notion of a search which leads nowhere informs much of my reading of the novel. I argue that the text requires a kind of following that is not following – an irreproducible (non)following, in other words.

I would like to relate this idea of following the unfollowable to some of the most dominant tropes in *The Silent Minaret*: rituals and routines. What the text does, I argue, is represent some rituals which, like Issa, cannot be followed. Frances, his aged upstairs neighbour, for instance, observes religious practices that have a strangeness that cannot be generalised, and therefore cannot be repeated. In the final section of this paper, I connect this discussion of rituals to the novel's political concerns, and in particular to its vision of a meaningful, non-violent cosmopolitanism. In order to unpack the complexity of Shukri's political utopianism, I draw on Jacques Derrida's work on hospitality, as well as Alain Badiou's theorisation of "the event." While their philosophical orientations differ, Derrida and Badiou both argue

that current forms of systemic and interpersonal violence are inevitable, and that this in turn makes the actualisation of impossible forms of community necessitous. It is precisely such unimaginable forms of cosmopolitan society to which Shukri's novel gestures.

*The Silent Minaret*, in my opinion, has become increasingly topical in the years since its publication. Its scathing analysis of the failures of the "War on Terror" has been validated in many ways,[1] and its troubling depiction of Israel's interventions on the West Bank is particularly pertinent now. Similarly, the novel's many descriptions of the inhospitable and nationalist aspects of British life have taken a concrete form. In 2016, Britain voted in a referendum to leave the European Union (EU). While there are a complex set of reasons for this decision, there can be no doubt that the driving force for many of those who have campaigned to leave is the issue of immigration. The foreign-born population of the country has increased dramatically since England entered the EU, in part because the union's "rules restrict the ability of member states to bar migration from other EU member states" (Beauchamp 2016). Leave proponents claim that this influx of immigrants can only be limited by exiting the EU. This anti-immigration sentiment is coupled with an attempt to return to what Andrew Solomon calls a "perilous nationalism" (2016). According to him, "[t]hose who voted Leave believe that they are like others of their nationality and unlike everyone else" (Solomon 2016). Such a spurious notion ignores what should be most evident in cosmopolitan societies, namely the intersectionality of identity (Solomon 2016).

Worryingly, the Leave argument has veered in the direction of xenophobia. Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), for instance, has spoken disparagingly of Romanians, but his most damning criticism has been of the Muslim community in England. Islamophobia and xenophobia almost certainly underpin the following statement made by him in 2015: "There is an especial problem with some of the people who've come here and who are of the Muslim religion who don't want to become part of our culture" (quoted in Beauchamp 2016). Farage and his fellow Leave campaigners may in time come to be viewed by other Britons as having done more harm than good. Indeed, many critics of what has become known as Brexit predict that it will lead to economic and social hardships of

1. Most recently, the Iraq Inquiry, otherwise known as the Chilcot Inquiry, has released its report on Britain's involvement in the Iraq invasion of 2003. Among its more damning findings, the report states that the UK had not exhausted all peaceful means of engagement before opting for war, that those in the Blair government had presented the case for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in Iraq with a certainty that cannot be justified, that the consequences of the war were not properly considered, and that the stated intentions of the attack were not achieved (Chilcot 2016). For more on this, see the report itself and Sir John Chilcot's statement.

various kinds.[2] Yet, no matter what the long-term consequences of this decision are, and how these influence popular opinion, what is clear is that present-day Britain's politics is inherently contradictory. Its multiculturalism and diversity is premised on the recognition of intersectional forms of identification which, in turn, allows for extraordinary cultural exchange and for a repudiation of violent nationalisms. And yet, this same multicultural reality has led to Brexit. In other words, the nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia of Britain are products of the very thing that cosmopolitan theory argues should lead to an end to these politics of exclusion.

Current-day Britain's cosmopolitanism is therefore severely limited, characterised by violence, and born of a limited hospitality that includes some while knowingly excluding others. It is therefore not hospitality, properly speaking, as it fails to provide a "welcome without reserve and without calculation, an exposure without limit to whoever arrives" (Derrida 2005: 6). Brexit is about hospitality in that it is about who is and is not a member of a certain community. The Islamophobia evident in some aspects of contemporary British politics is not an aberration or anomaly within an otherwise cosmopolitan space; rather, it is the inevitable result of a conditional hospitality that defines a limited form of cosmopolitanism.

Shukri's text, though published some years before the Brexit vote, depicts a fictional London that reflects this very paradox. Issa is a foreigner, a "stranger in a strange land", who should be able to both partake in and contribute to British life. But his presence is not valued in England, partly because of his politics, and partly because of his Muslim heritage. Through this character, Shukri is able to present a cogent critique of post-9/11 Britain, while also gesturing towards a form of community that might not be premised on violent structures that violate him.

A crucial episode that reflects the limits of Britain's claims to hospitality and tolerance is Issa's detainment at Heathrow. Issa notes despairingly that "*sealed packages were opened*" by the customs officials, which illustrates the intrusive nature of the ordeal (Shukri 2005: 180).[3] After being searched and harassed, he is locked in a "*windowless room*" with other detainees. In an exchange with one of them, he is asked where he comes from. After Issa informs him, the other detainee wonders: "*[t]hen why have they stopped you?*" (2005: 181). M. Neelika Jayawardane explains that the detainee's

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2. For example, the EIU, a forecasting group, has warned that unemployment will rise, that the British currency will depreciate substantially in comparison to the dollar, and that the country could slide into recession. According to them, "the damage from a decision to leave the EU [will] be felt until at least 2020" (Monaghan 2016).

3. All of Issa's speech and writing in the novel is captured in italics, which both emphasises his absence and implies that what others recall him saying might not be entirely accurate.

question is informed by his awareness of the latent prejudice of the English immigration authorities, who have been socialised and perhaps even overtly trained to believe that "origins betray one's criminality, or potential as threat" (2007: 58). As a consequence, the detainee's puzzlement reveals that he feels the South African should not be there at all because "his nationality and origins are not stereotyped as a breeding ground for terrorism" (Jayawardane 2007: 58).

While his homeland may not be considered suspect, his name certainly is. In response to Issa telling him his name, the other detainee declares: "*[t]hat's why. In here we all have such names*" (Shukri 2005: 181). According to Jayawardane, what is clear to the other man is that Issa's "name ties him to a suspect ancestry," "stamps him as potentially criminal, and effectively nullifies his individual achievements" (2007: 58).

Part of the problem for Issa is that there is vast array of documents that seem to speak for him. His passport, student visa, identity document and numerous other kinds of legal records all "map, regulate, and control [his] mobility" (Jayawardane 2007: 50). According to Jayawardane, they are therefore an "effective means of isolating [him] behind the complications of regulatory barriers in order to excise [him] and remove [his] ability to engage in the debate surrounding [his] bod[y]" (2007: 50). Consequently, one could argue that these documents are not designed primarily to assist transnational travel, but to curtail it. Moreover, while they allow the state to track and control Issa's movements, they do so in a contradictory manner. The more they supposedly reveal about Issa, the more they announce his strangeness, his 'otherness' from a British and more broadly Western culture to which he will only ever be given partial access.

There is a real-world postscript to the novel's fictional depiction of detainment by British authorities. In a strange and disturbing case of life imitating art, Shukri himself was detained and deported from London's Heathrow Airport on 14 July 2015. Following his marriage to a British citizen, he has held permanent British residence since 1997, with the right to remain in the UK indefinitely. While he has, of personal choice, never taken a British passport, and travels exclusively on his South African one, he and his wife own a home in London.

Two major reasons for his deportation have emerged. First, authorities questioned him about his visits to Yemen and the nature of his wife's work there. At the time, she was the Country Director of Oxfam in Yemen, one of the UK's largest international humanitarian aid agencies. Another reason given for his detainment is that his last visit to England had been more than two years prior. Shukri has publically provided reasons for this long absence from the country, which include the illness and eventual death of his mother.

In a poignant public statement from a conventionally private person,[4] he has also said the following:

> this kind of thing happens routinely to Africans arriving in the UK. Many don't have the resources or access to protest […]. In view of the dire ordeals facing African migrants in the Mediterranean, my circumstances are not as desperate and mine is not the worst case, but it is indicative of the increasing heavy-handedness facing African migrants at UK and EU borders. I hope that sharing my experiences will help to draw increased attention to theirs.
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> (quoted in BooksLive 2015)

In a piece titled "Losing London," Shukri describes his own feelings of powerlessness on the flight of deportation: "a moment of great weakness and dispossession, a reminder that I am a *muhajir*, an immigrant at the mercy of the journey, and vulnerable to the powerful who would enact their power over me," he writes (2015). Yet, the piece is not merely a recollection of personal anguish. As in the public statement he made earlier, Shukri here associates his plight with a broader context. Most pertinent is his critique of the escalating anti-immigration sentiment in England, what he refers to as the "malignant politics of the border [that] has become all-pervasive, violating private spaces, usurping democratic processes, and infecting language" (Shukri 2015). One cannot help but see that what has happened to Shukri and his family is not an isolated incident, but exists within a broad framework of failed cosmopolitanism. As Jayawardane maintains, the global nomad who can "flit between continents" without hassle bears little resemblance to the vast majority of travellers who must "stand in long queues at consulates," fret over visas and their costs, and provide "ever more proof of their legitimacy" (2015). No doubt this is why she concludes that "[t]hat cool, liquid identity of the global cosmopolitan remains, in reality, accessible to a privileged few" (Jayawardane 2015).

Yet Shukri's work is not merely a record of how such inequalities are established and maintained. It also gestures beyond these limited political configurations to suggest the possibilities inherent in but not actualised by the very processes (such as globalisation and global travel) of late capitalism. Much of this potential is portrayed in Frances, Issa's neighbour. Consider, for instance, the difference of opinion she has with her priest, Father Jerome. In the discussion, he valorises Britain's immigration policy: "countries have to set limits on the number of immigrants they can accept, otherwise they'd lose their national character", he informs her (Shukri 2005: 248). The logic underpinning the young cleric's ideas (which, it bears repeating, was heard often during the debates about Brexit) is that there could be no nation (and no national character) were there not limits that differentiate nations, and these borders must therefore be policed so that the

4. See Jayawardane 2015.

nation knows who is entering and leaving its territory. As Jacques Derrida notes, there is no "[n]o hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home" (2000: 55). But, he adds, "since there is no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence" (Derrida 2000: 55). And, for exactly these reasons, "one can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect one's own hospitality, the own home that makes possible one's own hospitality" (Derrida 2000: 53). If nations construct their immigration and emigration policies on the basis of limited hospitality (as they surely must), then their most "open" welcome harbours a certain degree of xenophobia and violence.

For this reason, limited hospitality is always undone by its own finitude. That is to say, it is not hospitable to limit, to exclude, to prescribe and to attempt to know the other. To be properly hospitable, contends Derrida, one must allow the other to be other; one must respect the alterity of the guest (2005: 6). While such a demand is impossible, it both enables and disables the very concept and all practical forms of hospitality.

A similar and related aporia ensures that borders are always more open than any policing of them can ensure. They exist only on the basis of their being cross-able. Frances says as much when she reminds her priest that his precious English "national character" was not "lost" but ultimately enhanced by the arrival of his French ancestors and her Irish ones (Shukri 2005: 248). If exclusion is a condition for the establishment and preservation of a nation, it is also what a nation must inherently reject. There is no nation whose history is not one of border crossing and cultural exchange.

Frances fears that Father Jerome's orthodoxy will prevent him from accepting the validity of her argument (Shukri 2005: 248). She therefore attempts to persuade him by couching her ideas in religious terms: "have you ever thought, Father, about what would happen if the anti-immigration bigots had their way? For instance, would the Holy Family be given asylum in Britain now on the evidence of Joseph's bad dream," she asks (Shukri 2005: 249). In the dream she mentions, Joseph is visited by an angel who warns him to flee to Egypt because Herod's men have been ordered to kill Jesus once he is born. Frances wonders, sceptically, if this Middle Eastern family would find refuge in modern Britain. Would they, like so many Muslims, be questioned and harassed, even turned away? Given that Joseph and Mary were turned away at every inn in Bethlehem before being offered sanctuary in the stables, the idea of shutting them out once more has ironic import. Due to his orthodoxy, Father Jerome supports an immigration policy which would likely refuse asylum to the "Holy Family." He would advocate denying access to the family who are the basis of Christianity. Clearly, there is a dissonance between the faith the priest espouses and the practices he condones. And, in effect, the latter negates the former, because in practice, he would refuse access to the living god in whose name his religion is

constructed; he would, for orthodox reasons, exclude Christ from Christianity.

Importantly, Shukri does not depict all religion as inherently inhospitable. Rather, he contrasts the dogmatism of Father Jerome with the radical openness of his parishioner. In her, the reader finds a faith which does not correspond with any orthodoxy. Indeed, so as to be truly religious (to assert her faith in the most profound sense), she welcomes practices which are seemingly antithetical to the Christian faith. She exercises her faith precisely by opening it to the faiths of others. It is through this character in the novel that Shukri seems to portray a cosmopolitanism that actually functions for the good.

Spurred by her conversations with Issa, she becomes fascinated by the similarities between Christianity and Islam. Angels, the Immaculate Conception, and the virgin birth are common to both faiths. Tellingly, the Koran even documents aspects of the story of Christ that the Bible does not. For instance, it notes that Jesus's grandfather (Mary's father) was named Imran. One can only speculate as to why this name, indicative of an Arabian ancestry, is not included in the Bible. Whatever the historical reason for the omission, from a modern perspective, one cannot help but read it in terms of an increasing intolerance that those practising Christianity in the Western world have shown for Arabian culture. While Father Jerome, with whom she shares her discovery, has little interest in a common heritage, Frances finds it invigorating. She wants to reassert the Arabian heritage of Jesus's mother, even if others would prefer it were forgotten. According to Ronit Frenkel, this character allows Shukri to emphasise "the overlap between what is constructed as incommensurate", which opens the possibility for "restrictive binary models [to] give way to mutually enabling categories" (2011: 123).

And it is not only in ancient religious history that Frances uncovers similar aspects of the two monotheistic faiths. In her daily rosary, she quite literally practises what she preaches. Issa has given her a gift of a tasbeh, used for prayer, which might be considered the Islamic equivalent of rosary beads. She keeps it with her own rosary beads in a satin pouch, and often the two become entangled. Frances comes to think of the intertwined beads as her "trosebery", and part of her religious ritual each day includes carefully "peel[ing] the beads apart […] when she sits down to pray" (Shukri 2005: 14). The two religious objects are almost inexorably knotted into one: a physical manifestation of the linkages between Islam and Christianity. Her "ritual" of disentangling the tasbeh from the rosary beads (ironically) reveals the failure of differentiation, that is, that what is constructed as different about the two religions is premised on what is the same. Hence, by touch alone, Frances is often unable to tell the one prayer bead from the other.

Frances's practice of keeping the beads in the same pouch, and separating them before she prays, though it does not correlate with other religious practice (indeed, because of this), presents the reader with a ritual which is

hospitable and open to the other by virtue of being distinct from custom. Furthermore, her expression of faith implies that religion is not, in and of itself, closed and prescriptive (even if, as is the case here, it is monotheistic). Father Jerome's dogmatic approach provides a warning of what becomes of faith when it is stultified and enveloped by the historical forces of orthodoxy, politics and empire. By rejecting these things, Frances practises the "true religion", which it to say, she is able to worship god without placing upon the deity the restrictions and limited forms of understanding premised on a special knowledge of him/her.

Both Christianity and Islam declare that god is unknowable, beyond the forms and understanding of mortal humans. They also state that their 'version' of god is the one true, absolutely 'real' one. The contradictions are demonstrably absurd and can only be reconciled by recognising that an unknowable god would demand an equally unknowable, singular religious practice in his/her name. (In fact, the practice would be one that would eschew naming.) Such ritual could not align itself with the historically determined doctrines of the monotheistic faiths represented in *The Silent Minaret*. Rather, it would be more like Frances's practice: fumbling in fading light, uncertain of what was being touched, and infinitely open.

It is worth noting that Frances's ritual (which is like no other) reminds her of a place that Issa told her about where one sees a "mosque in the shadow of a cathedral".[5] When he informs her of this place, she "looks up to imagine the sight" which she thinks of as "a cathemosdraquel". The phrase she coins is a combination of words, much like the term "trosbery" (Shukri 2005: 14-15). For her, this image demands a new name. The neologism is like a promise that some day, yet to come, it will designate an actual place rather than a mere trick of light (shadow falling in a particular way when seen from a particular vantage point). Like Frances, the reader is also obliged "look up to imagine" what does not currently exist. S/he is asked to find a new language to describe a new world. One might call this an act of faith.

Frances's form of religious belief is exemplary: she is a Christian who abandons or subverts much Christian practice and doctrine. Unlike Father Jerome, she refuses to have her faith distorted by exclusionary politics. Disillusioned by the Afghanistan war and the part she feels Christianity has

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5. It is possible that Shukri is referring to the Mosque-Cathedral in Córdoba, Spain. Such an assertion is supported when one considers the complex history of this place. While the site is an example of the influence of Muslim culture in Europe, there have been attempts to erase this history (Malik 2015). According to Kenan Malik, "Córdoba's mosque-cathedral is an architectural expression of the complex, intricate story of Europe. And, for some, that is the problem. In recent years the Cathedral Chapter of Córdoba, the branch of the Catholic Church that administers the site, has slowly wiped away the word 'mosque' from the monument's title and from the publications about the site" (2015).

played in legitimising it, at service one Sunday when the congregation rises to line up for communion, she walks out of the church (Shukri 2005: 164). She does this to be a Christian, that is, so as to live up to the ideals of Christianity.

The point I am making may appear fairly obvious. There is an unavoidable difference between religious ideals, philosophy or theory, on the one hand, and religious practice or ritual, on the other. Religion must grapple with the limits and conditions of the phenomenal world in which it is practised. Even the most devout follower would not argue otherwise. Yet, religious practices, particularly the rituals of the two major monotheistic faiths which I have discussed, are carried out precisely to move beyond this world. Prayer, for instance, is an attempt to gain access to god and thereby transcend the constraints of the phenomenological world. The ritual which attempts to gain an experience of god is and must be a ritual like no other. It must orient itself to that of which it can have no knowledge. As such, it is the duty of every true believer not to follow.

Religion depends on the dissonance between its practice and philosophy being invalid. The contradiction between the patently obvious fact that ritual necessarily falls short and the pressing demand that it nevertheless overcomes its limitations (by exceeding itself and the world of which it is a part) is irreconcilable. No faith can sustain the paradox. And yet, no faith is possible without it. Ironically, religion is corrupted by its own ideals.

It is not coincidental that Issa's name is a variation of the Arabic word for Jesus, who is, for Christians, the most exceptional person mentioned in the Bible. He is thought to be both god and mortal man. Furthermore, his love for all humankind and especially the poor is the basis of Christian charity and faith, and his sacrificial death serves as atonement for all people's sins. In effect, Jesus's life is the example that all Christians must follow, though, in actuality, none can follow in his footsteps as his love and compassion are infinite while humans are limited and born to (and of) sin. Like the followers of Jesus, readers who attempt to follow Issa's example endeavour to do the impossible.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest how unfollowable routines might suggest a way forward for cosmopolitan constructions of community. Proponents of the theory of cosmopolitanism claim that it is better equipped than multiculturalism to provide an understanding of the pluralisation and globalisation of modern society. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen argue the following:

> Cosmopolitanism registers and reflects the multiplicity of issues, questions, processes and problems that affect and bind people, irrespective of where they were born or reside. The theory and practice of cosmopolitanism have at least the potential to abolish the razor-wired camps, national flags and walls of silence that separate us from our fellow human beings.
>
> (2002: 22)

They do, however, concede that "practically all the recent writings on the topic remain in the realm of rhetoric," and that "[t]here is little description or analysis of how contemporary cosmopolitan philosophies […] can be formed, instilled or bolstered" (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 21). Undoubtedly, the potentially transformative power of cosmopolitanism would be best harnessed if practice aligned more closely with theory. It might then be instructive to consider the extent to which such an alignment is possible. Ulf Hannerz, for instance, has suggested that cosmopolitanism can best be thought of as "a mode of managing meaning" which involves "relationships to a plurality of cultures" and "an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other" (1990: 239). Put slightly differently, one must be open to other cultures and ways of thinking, in such a way that one does not reify or assume prior knowledge of those other cultures (as multiculturalism might be argued to do). Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that the real challenge of cosmopolitanism is how to be ethical in a world of strangers, in a world where one is exposed daily to people who do not share one's culture, values, ideas and so forth. How can one both be concerned for all human life and take seriously the vast differences between cultures and even individuals (Appiah 2007: xiii)? Is such a thing possible?

Derrida has proffered that the cosmopolitan society must be infinitely hospitable (2000: 4-5). Each limit placed on hospitality to the other is a limitation of the cosmopolitan nature of society. The corollary is that a conditional form of cosmopolitanism can be used for violent ends; it can itself enact and condone xenophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination. Undoubtedly, the London Issa enters at the beginning of the new millennium is a prime example of this compromised form of cosmopolitan community.

Issa represents the countless people who have been victimised by an inhospitable modern world. His disappearance is a tragic loss that is mourned not only by his family and friends, but perhaps even by the reader of the novel. As such, the reader is placed in a position of some discomfort: if one does not condone the violence that so disturbs Issa, one is obliged not to be a part of the world that has produced it. One is asked to reject, in a profound and absolute way, the compromised socio-political conditions that allowed for, say, the "War on Terror". To do so, one must surely follow Issa, disappear from the world as it is currently constructed.

Alain Badiou refers to "the State" as the "system of constraints" that "prescribes what, in a given situation, is the impossibility specific to that given situation, from the prescriptive of the formal prescription of what is possible" (2015: 182). One could argue that the current state of society inhibits the possibility of an infinitely hospitable, truly cosmopolitan world. The State therefore makes the unequal, deeply divided political landscape depicted in *The Silent Minaret* seem natural and inevitable. Badiou's work has, for this reason, continually demanded the coming of the "event," which

he defines as a "rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages as it exists for any particular situation" (2015: 181). In other words, an event is "the creation of new possibilities" which are "from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation […] strictly impossible" (Badiou 2015: 182). While Derrida's work is not directly equatable with Badiou's (and there are subtleties and complexities of each which I cannot address here), both advocate the coming of what they determine, in different senses of the word, is impossible. This imperative is not simply political or philosophical, but both. That is to say, for both thinkers, the nexus of politics and philosophy is ethics – the ethics of the impossible.

Shukri's novel is situated in a time and place recognisable as the current day, in which a discourse that describes a "clash of civilisations" between the West and Islamic world is being widely disseminated.[6] Moreover, these "civilisations" are being constructed along religious lines. Yet Shukri does not allow these constructed differences to dominate his novel. Instead, he imagines strange religious practices that eschew difference, that open up space for the other, and are, in a sense, unfollowable. In my opinion, these rituals that cannot be repeated mark the possibility of the impossible: the coming of the event of a properly cosmopolitan world, a world of ethical respect for strangers and strangeness.

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6. This idea of a "clash of civilizations" was first proposed by Samuel Huntington. It has since become an influential part of the rhetoric that has been used to justify the "War on Terror". For more on this, see Mamdani's critique of Huntington's thesis (2004: 20-22).

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