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Article:
Chambers, Claire orcid.org/0000-0001-8996-4129 (2011) 'Guantánamo Boy' : An Interview with Moazzam Begg. Postcolonial Text. pp. 1-12.

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Postcolonial Text, Vol 6, No 2 (2011)

"Guantánamo Boy":[1] An Interview with Moazzam Begg

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Moazzam Begg was born in Birmingham to liberal Indian Muslim parents, went to a Jewish primary school, and as a teenager became a member of the Birmingham-based Lynx gang. In the 1990s he campaigned on behalf of oppressed Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya, before spending a short time in Kabul during the early 2000s working towards the foundation of a girls' school. In the chaos of the American attacks on Afghanistan following 9/11, Begg and his family were briefly separated and eventually reunited in Pakistan. He was seized from his Pakistani home in 2002 by security forces and imprisoned in Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, after which he was moved to the Guantánamo Bay Detention Facility. As Karen Greenburg has observed, "[t]he most lasting legacy of the early Guantanamo is the image of the slight, dark-skinned men in orange jumpsuits, chained and bent over on their knees, goggled and deafened, dehydrated and soiled, unaware of where they were or why they were at Guantanamo" (219). At this space, which fell outside international law, Begg was detained without charge for three years and experienced over three hundred vicious interrogations.

Since his release in 2005, he has become an important international spokesman on the rights of those whom his organization calls "cage prisoners" (see www.cageprisoners.com), campaigning on behalf of fellow-torture victim and former-Guantánamo inmate, Binyam Mohamed. As such, Begg occupies unusual territory, at once representing a human rights issue and holding a conservative position on morality, gender relations, and sexuality. Begg's book, *Enemy Combatant* (2006), was written with help from the journalist Victoria Brittain. While Begg was incarcerated, Brittain had co-written (with South African author Gillian Slovo) the celebrated play *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, which was based on interviews with, and written accounts surrounding, the detention of five prisoners including Begg (see *Enemy* 273; Brittain and Slovo).

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[1] The pun is Anna Perera's. Her novel, *Guantanamo Boy*, centres on a boy who visits family in Karachi, finds himself in the midst of a demonstration, and is picked up by intelligence agency officials who transfer him to Kandahar and then Guantánamo Bay. Similarly apprehended while with family in Pakistan and tortured in Afghanistan and Cuba, Begg may be older than Perera's protagonist but, since his release, he too has become a spokesman for the human rights abuses inflicted upon those imprisoned or killed as part of the "war on terror."

Enemy Combatant was the first memoir to be released by a former Guantánamo prisoner and won the Published Non-Fiction category of the Muslim Writers Awards in 2008. Begg also wrote poetry during his incarceration, and his poem "Homeward Bound" is anthologized in a collection of poetry by Guantánamo detainees (Falkoff 29-30). In addition to the inevitable questions about his imprisonment, we also discussed his literary influences and the fact that he came to writing from a different route than most authors, out of the experience of solitary confinement. This is important because, as Barbara Harlow demonstrates in her brilliant article about "[c]orpses and corpuses, both habeas and literary" (21), creative writing, autobiographies, reports, and legal documents have played a central role in challenging the ethics, praxis, politics, and legitimacy of American "black sites" such as Guantánamo Bay. We spoke about the development of his attachment to Muslim, British, and Black histories; the idea of "moderate" as compared to "radical" Islam; and his attitude towards *jihad* and Islamic financial systems.

I conducted this interview in Leeds after a Stop the War meeting at which Begg was the keynote speaker. It took place in 2009, before the controversy in which Gita Sahgal criticized Amnesty International for its links with Begg (see Sahgal; Begg "Hatred"); before the dramatic surge of publicity for the anti-Muslim, racist English Defence League; and, most momentously of all, before the Arab Spring and the killing of Osama bin Laden. Despite these lacunae, there is still great foresight expressed here. As with all my interviews, I record the author's ideas without comment, and readers are invited to form their own opinions about the views articulated (views which I do not always share with respondents).

CC: First of all, I wanted to ask you about the process of writing *Enemy Combatant: The Terrifying True Story of a Briton in Guantánamo*, and working with Victoria Brittain. How did that come about?

MB: I think I met her at the home of Gareth Peirce, my solicitor. I knew what I wanted to say in the book, but was unsure how to structure it, so this is where Victoria stepped in to help. The process was that she would interview me about a particular section or subject, the transcription of which would then be tidied up by her. This was handed to me to write, rewrite, add to, take away from, and restructure. So although the book is co-written, I think you can hear my own voice in it. Victoria and I were both keen for it not to appear ghost-written, and so the sense that these are my words was retained.

CC: I was struck by the intertextuality of the book, the impact that literature and film (including Kafka, Hans Christian Andersen, *Arabian Nights*, and Hollywood epics such as *Black Hawk Down* and *A Few Good Men*) has had on your worldview, and the release you find through writing letters and poetry. Could you speak about your

influences, and whether you are going to continue writing, or solely pursue your activism from this point?

MB: I wish I could write a lot more. I have ended up writing commentary for *The Guardian* or *The Independent*, which is fine, but it's not really what I enjoy doing from the heart. I liked writing poetry, but having said that, poetry is something I only discovered in Guantánamo, and it was solitary confinement that produced that response in me. In answer to your question about influences, reading Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" inspired me to write a poem called "The Message," which follows his style. I only began writing in Guantánamo Bay, and I don't think I could ever have done it anywhere else. It's sad, because it means that I need that isolated environment to write, and I can't do it in just any situation. As far as activism is concerned, it just rolls out of me now, because I've done it so often. But in my spare time I try to read as much literature as I can. I enjoy doing this with my children at home; we talk about writing poetry, and the latest literature they're reading. Sometimes they find it exceedingly boring, but I try to instill in them a love of literature and poetry, and a recognition of how important it is to have a good command of language and be able to express yourself. One of the things that I remember discussing with some of the detainees in Guantánamo Bay, who were suspected of belonging to al-Qa'ida, was their love for poetry. One guy in particular—the only self-declared al-Qa'ida member that I met—was so well-versed in poetry, it was unbelievable. He had read many English poetry classics, and we discussed how grasping a language is impossible without a good understanding of poetry.

CC: How did you feel about winning the Published Non-fiction category of the Muslim Writers Awards? What do you think about the current interest surrounding "Muslim writing"?

MB: I was delighted to win the Award, and think that at this juncture of history, the term "Muslim writing" empowers people to write. Now, when the focus is on Muslims in Britain and elsewhere in a largely negative light, I think it is important that the Muslim voice is able to articulate itself. Giving speeches is one thing, but writing is completely different; it is creating a record for history. The ability to write has been a huge part of the Muslim world for a very long time – in Arabic, Urdu, and Persian – but in English we've still got leaps and bounds to make in order to achieve recognition. Once that happens it won't be necessary to say "Muslim writers," because they will be on a par with other groups, based upon merit alone, and I look forward to that. At the Muslim Writers Awards ceremony, I saw some amazing writers, but the sad part is that, for now, this is the only vehicle they have through which to be recognized. I think that the Awards organizers are going about it in the right way and getting other people engaged; it may be the *Muslim* Writers Awards, but it's endorsed by many others from outside the community.

CC: You have a very complex personal history, incorporating both Indian and Pakistani heritage, along with your father's insistence on your family's Tartar and Mongol ancestry (22). You were also educated at a Jewish institution, King David's Junior and Infant School and, in the memoir, you discuss how this both stimulates and confuses you (22-9). You later married a Palestinian woman who has never been to her own country, but grew up in Syria and now lives in Britain. Did these experiences contribute in any way towards your involvement in political Islam?

MB: Yes, the confusion of identities was important, not knowing exactly where I fitted in during the 1970s and 1980s in Britain. The clash of identities—Asian, British Muslim, Pakistani/Indian—was confusing, no doubt about it, particularly because the Muslims around me were from Pakistani Kashmir and specifically the region of Mirpur. I was one of the odd ones out in that respect. They'd speak in their language and I wouldn't understand what they were saying, because I didn't speak Mirpuri, but Urdu. They regarded Urdu as elitist, whereas to me it was just a language. Yet now I speak so many languages, which was a learning process that came later in life. However, my attachment to Islam always existed. I was hugely influenced by the film *The Message* (Akkad) and the "Heroes of Islam" book series (Ahmad). These texts gave me some role models to whom I could fully relate in terms of historical context. I used to, and still do, love British history, but there's a sense of sadness as I've got no personal link that allows me to say, "This is part of my history." I found it easier to relate to a history that didn't see things in terms of genealogical relationships, but rather in terms of ideological relationships, forged through faith. That is why I found in Islam something of paramount importance to me. When I first started practising Islam, it wasn't necessarily a choice, but simply something that was available and present in front of me. I started going to the mosque more often because of seeing what was happening to the Bosnian refugees. There I met people who encouraged me to learn about Islam directly from the source—the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions—rather than through the traditional mediation of the Mullahs. That's when I started looking towards and reading more scriptural Islam.

CC: Has your religious perspective altered at all? You seem to have moved away from some of the beliefs you had when you were young and idealistic, and you admit that you have regrets about "certain decisions" you made in your life (239), although you use ellipses to keep these deliberately unspecified. When the lawyer Gitanjali Gutierrez becomes tearful and says that she has been praying for you, you describe feeling remorseful because her compassion goes against your negative view of Hindus and other polytheists (270).

MB: I have changed, there's no doubt about that. What I used to think when I was younger inevitably led me to be more isolated. It's not because I came from an isolationist background, but I began to

withdraw through my choice of practising Islam. I still believe that this was correct in terms of following Islam scripturally, but not in terms of the interpretation being exclusionary. I continue to regard myself as Salafi in the proper sense of the term, as a seeker after a pure, unadulterated Islam. However, I don't associate or ally myself with the people today who call themselves the Salafi Movement, in that isolationist sense.

CC: In Guantánamo, you became frustrated with widespread ignorance among the guards about the nuances of your faith, as they collapsed everything under the term "Islamism," from political parties such as the Tablighi Jamaat to violent, nihilistic groups like al-Qa'ida (two very different organizations that your American captives believed to be working together, 339).

MB: Yes, it is very wearisome speaking to people about these issues if they don't understand. It's even more difficult when decisions are made based on their misunderstanding. Their misunderstanding impacts on your freedom, and whether, or to what extent, you're going to be tortured. My frustration resulted from the feeling that I was talking to an ignoramus. It may appear conceited for me to say that I think I know more about it than you, an American guard. However, you are judging me, based upon your misinterpretations, while I'm not judging you for your politics, your origins, and the broader history of the United States of America. I recognize that nuances exist between different groups from where you originate, so why can't you do the same for me?

CC: Despite the lack of nuance demonstrated by many of your guards, several reviewers have commended *Enemy Combatant* for the empathy with which you portray the guards (see Sands; Meek). There is a remarkable lack of bitterness in your writing, such that you see positives in your experience and you make distinctions between the guards, ranging from the good, to the misguided, to the ignorant, which moves away from a black and white picture. You write, "all Americans were not the same" (237).

MB: Yes, and this is really important, because despite what I believe in, and what I did, I never thought that would impair me from striving to be just towards people. I've always tried to look at people individually. At times of difficulty, we all tend to make generalizations about people, and I remember doing this on occasion. For example, I wrote a poem called "Indictment USA" (241; 299), in which I indict the country for everything it has done from its inception to the war on terror, but that was written in a state of anger during the time of my imprisonment and torture. When it came down to individual soldiers, often I would say to them, "You are the reason why I don't hate your country."

CC: You also noticed segregation amongst the guards along racial lines, with the Hispanic, White, and Black soldiers all remaining relatively separate (247). You recall talking to some of the Black guards about figures such as Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, and about your interest in R&B, rap, and reggae (181). Please could you expand on why you, and many people of Muslim heritage in the UK, feel a connection to Black and African American history?

MB: I think it shows that when people feel marginalized, they tend to come together. I remember looking at Black history in the 1980s. It was hip to be Black; that was how it felt. You want to rebel? That's the community to do it from. You'd see so many young Muslims, myself included sometimes, speaking like a guy who's just come back from Kingston, Jamaica. Although one identity formation is a race and the other is a religion, you can see a similar rebelliousness within the two communities.

CC: In your book, you reject the Americans' euphemistic and misleading terms for you and your fellow-prisoners including "enemy combatant" and "detainee," in favour of arguably more straightforward terms such as "abductee," or "captive" (253). Staying with the issue of linguistic nuance, how do you see the current discourse surrounding "Islamists," and "good Muslim/bad Muslim" "radical/moderate" binary thinking that currently proliferates (see Mamdani)?

MB: I don't like the terminology about "moderates" and "radicals," although I can understand why people use it as a kind of shorthand in the West. I often like to think, how are these issues seen in the Muslim world? Do they use the same terminology? For example, is there an equal and translatable term in the Arabic language for an Islamist? The answer is no, not really. I mean you can say an *islami*, but that sounds strange, because it just means somebody who follows Islam, and we know that the right word for that is a Muslim.[2] So there are terms that have been anglicized. Ordinary people in Britain: fine, that's their terminology, and it doesn't mean very much. However, when I see people like Ed Husain and others using the term directly and menacingly, in phrases such as "the Islamist threat," I start to get worried. Very few people in the world actually accept the position that Islamism is automatically a threat except, ironically, those governments who find that their greatest challenge comes from Islamic movements. In all honesty, I think the overwhelming majority of people right now will look at organizations such as the Quilliam

[2] According to several Arabic speakers on the ISLAMAAR mailing list, Begg is right in saying that the noun 'Islamist' in the singular does not yet exist comfortably in the Arabic language. The term *islami* is now occasionally used in the Arabic media to denote an Islamist, although more correctly it means 'Islamic'. However, the word is commonly used in the plural, *islamiyyun*, which is broadly equivalent to the word 'Islamists', while *islamawi* refers to Islamist. I would like to thank Emmanuelle Stefanidis, Zaid Adhami, Alexandre Caeiro, Jawad Qureshi, Ruth Mas, Edward E. Curtis IV, and Line Khatib for their generous advice and insights. For further information on the provenance of the word 'Islamist', see Martin and Barzegar.

Foundation[3] and say that it's clearly supported by the government and propagates a government agenda. In 2006, former Hizb ut-Tahrir member and prisoner Maajid Nawaz was due to speak with me at an event in Sheffield, but on the day, the organizers wouldn't allow him to present his ideas as they felt he was too radical. He came and sat in the audience instead, but I said, "I don't see what the problem is, let him speak." He did in the end, and talked about the Islamic state and Hizb ut-Tahrir, and outlined his desire for a Muslim land where everybody can live peacefully and people aren't oppressed. What he said sounded very good. So I found it extremely odd that he renounced Hizb ut-Tahrir not long afterwards and joined the Quilliam Foundation. It didn't make any sense, it wasn't logical, and I couldn't understand where it came from. I mean, I have no problem with somebody wanting to leave Hizb ut-Tahrir, but it's strange that he so swiftly started attacking the whole idea of political Islam, or Islam and politics. The reality is, in the Muslim world the only major challenge to the despotic regimes has come from the Islamic organizations. Opposition to Islamic political parties has been such that it challenges everything we believe in in terms of democracy. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is brutally repressed; it is the most popular organization that exists there, and yet it is banned. In Turkey, in Palestine too, the West's rejection of Islamic parties is hypocritical, because it basically shows that democratic principles only apply to the Middle East when they accord with western interests. You'd think that it'd be in the interests of the West to have Muslim peoples, groups, or countries united rather than disunited. However, the sad, neocolonial fact is that it's perceived as being better to keep Muslims at one another's throats, divided in terms of nationality. This never used to happen when there was one contiguous Muslim empire. I don't like to come to the conclusion that there is a vested interest in keeping the Muslim world down, but that is how it appears to many.

CC: In relation to literature, which is my area of interest, certain incidents during the last decade have similarly been interpreted by some as oppressive towards Muslims. For example, Salman Rushdie's knighthood in 2007 caused much controversy, so I wanted to ask you about your response to *The Satanic Verses* Affair in 1989, and subsequently how you feel about the whole debate.

MB: I remember myself feeling, as a teenager when the *fatwa* was passed, that I wished the Ayatollah had said nothing, because he made this guy famous. I remember reading *The Satanic Verses* as well, or parts of the book, and I actually thought it was really badly written, and it didn't appeal to me as a book. This is not to say that he's not a good writer, because he is a good writer.

CC: According to many scholars, *jihad* is all about spiritual struggle from within, whereas you argue that throughout history the term *jihad*

[3] A British "counter-extremism think tank" founded by Maajid Nawaz, Rashaad Zaman Ali, and author of *The Islamist*, Ed Husain.

has been employed and interpreted to denote warfare (80-1). You make it clear that you are opposed to civilian killing, but suggest that violence can be justified in a war situation. Could you expand on your view of *jihad*?

MB: I think people who say that *jihad* isn't about physical self-protection try to rewrite history or, more seriously, rewrite what every Islamic scholar has said throughout history. Yes, there is an element of an internal struggle called *jihad*, which you will find under the virtues of patience, the virtues of steadfastness, and so on. However, if you look at books about *jihad*, they deal with military tactics, war booty, how to treat prisoners: these are the issues examined in books of Islamic jurisprudence. In a climate of fear such as the one we're living in now, you respond in a way that you think will appease your antagonists. A more helpful response would be to say that killing innocent civilians is not *jihad*, because there are many verses from the Qur'an, and many sayings about the Prophet and his life, that clearly condemn the targeting of women and children, civilians, people who are in monasteries, and those in the clergy. I have read extensively on the subject, and published an article called "Jihad and Terrorism: A War of the Words" (Begg, "Jihad").

CC: While you enter those debates, you also highlight some positive aspects to Muslim faith practice that are rarely mentioned in the media, like the commitment to charity. *Zakat*, or alms-giving, is a mandatory pillar of Islam for adults, but from a young age you began paying *sadaqah*, voluntary charitable donations (21). You contended that some of the American guards were materialistic and seemed to lack this sense of social responsibility (221).

MB: Yes. Looking through the *Muslim Directory* (Darr), one thing I often notice is how many Muslim charities there are, in comparison to the size of the community. In the *Directory* one sees so many advertisements for charity, because there is great emphasis on compassion and generosity in Islam. Islam is constantly being attacked in one way or another at present, but one of the few areas that isn't is Islamic finance (see El-Gamal). If you look up the etymology of the word "mortgage," it's fantastic. It comes from the Latin "mori" and "gage," which means the promise to pay until death. Serfs used to be mortgaged to the landowners for the entire duration of their lives if they ever wanted to own anything. You think to yourself, that's precisely how people feel now about their mortgages.

CC: You experienced first-hand how attitudes changed after 9/11, as you were picked up in your own home in Pakistan, as opposed to being taken as a prisoner of war on a battlefield. You describe feeling reluctant to travel on public transport in London after the July 7th bombings due to people's suspicions. And yet, you still talk about Britain as being a "special place where Muslims from all over the

world were able to come and speak out" (381). How did the reaction to 9/11 in America compare to the British response to the 7/7 attacks?

MB: Everyone who was in the United States soon after 9/11 said there was a sudden surge in patriotism, whereas Londoners were more subdued after 7/7, and I don't think flags came out in the same way. I was pleased about that; it gave me some hope in this country. I remember the anti-Irish marches of the 1970s. I haven't seen any marches against Muslims, although I'm sure there are plenty of people who would like to. I don't know what the Muslim community in America is like, but it seems to me less united in a sense. People seem to feel more American, and there may be less baggage from their ancestral past. In Britain, you are encouraged to retain an attachment to the countries that you or your parents happen to come from. At the same time, and for better or worse, this is home. It is manifested in the language I speak, and the way I speak it; like an English person, from England. When I was in Guantánamo, what place did I miss? Was it Afghanistan? Saudi Arabia? Pakistan? Bosnia? The answer was the streets of Sparkhill, Birmingham. Not the battle-scarred mountains of Afghanistan, or the beautiful Mosque in Makkah, but the concrete jungle I came from. It's funny, because in the Arab world I am referred to by the description, "the British guy." There is more recognition of my Britishness overseas than there is at home, and that is why I subtitled my book variously "*The Terrifying True Story of a Briton in Guantánamo*" and "*A British Muslim's Journey to Guantánamo and Back*" (although in the United States, they removed the British reference, changing the subtitle to "*My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*"). I've been asked why I chose to identify my Britishness at a time like this. My response is: because the government of Britain today does not determine my view of this country. My perspective on Britain is only determined by the experiences I have had here. I could easily base my impression of Britain on being beaten up by racist skinheads, and question my attachment, but I don't. Taking an overall look at my experience here, that is broadly how I feel, although it is also important that I don't say, "I am British. Full stop." Alongside, perhaps even above my Britishness, I have to assert my Muslim identity.

CC: The problem arises when opinion pollsters and others pressurize British Muslims to choose between these two equally important aspects of identity. It's like saying to me, "Are you British or a woman?"

MB: Exactly.

CC: The American guards called various centres at Bagram names such as Twin Towers, Somalia, USS *Cole*, Nairobi, Pentagon: this litany of events that they see as being connected, when they are in fact discrete incidents.

MB: Absolutely. The biggest ones that stuck out to me, more than anything else were Somalia, Beirut, and Nairobi. With the USS Cole, the Twin Towers, and the Pentagon, you can see the links there because they're all alleged al-Qa'ida attacks. But those other three don't make any sense to me at all other than suggesting that there is a perception in the mind of some soldiers that this is actually a war against Muslims.

CC: Yes, that's made very plain when the guard shows you a pair of handcuffs that he says with heavy significance were given to him by a widow of one of the Twin Towers victims (2).

MB: Yes. Another thing, and I think I forgot to mention this in the book, was that there were US flags flying everywhere in the prisons I was held in. I'd imagine they would hang them up in the Bagram detention base, or in Guantánamo, and later roll them back up, take them home and say, "This was flying over the heads of those terrorists that we captured."

CC: Part of the reason MI5 was interested in you for several years before you were picked up is that you've been to flashpoints such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. A military interrogator quoted in a review of *Enemy Combatant* makes an interesting comparison between your activism and the idealism inspired by the Spanish Civil War, when authors such as George Orwell and Stephen Spender either went to Spain to fight, or wrote material in support of the socialist Republican side (see Golden).

MB: Yes. It is also comparable to the situation in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. Let's ask how many thousands of people went over there, with both the knowledge and blessing of the British and Americans. Then there were those sponsored to go from Saudi Arabia, and Egypt and so on. It comes back down to interests. If al-Qa'ida hadn't carried out attacks on civilians, where would we be? In Guantánamo, al-Qa'ida is often referred to by some soldiers as "baby killers." Well, isn't that nice terminology? But if we did a tally to see how many babies the US troops have killed, the difference between that and the infants al-Qa'ida have killed would numerically be like that between heaven and earth. A big, strong American soldier wouldn't want to be called a baby killer, as he is defending his rights fighting for God and country, and can do no evil. When people call for Tony Blair or George W. Bush to be arrested and tried, it may sound like a crazy thing to say. But, when you consider what has taken place, Osama bin Laden should be judged (and rightly so), but Bush and Blair should too. One set of actions does not cancel out the other.

CC: Despite the horrors of this "war on terror", you describe yourself as an optimistic person (189; 276).

MB: I'm hopeful about people. I think that for every "defeat" on civil right issues, there are also victories that often don't get reported. I see them, though, because I tour the country speaking in places as diverse as Leeds, and as "middle-England" as Wells Cathedral in Somerset.

CC: What sort of response have you had in these posher, "middle-England" areas?

MB: A fantastic response. I mean, absolutely amazing: it's as though they've never heard political arguments like mine, and they were expecting to hear some sort of ranting, raving lunatic calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Britain. The most common response is: "Don't you sound so terribly English"?

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