My interest in the Arab creation stories is in essence a personal experience that goes back to my early childhood. It all began when my mother told me the story of our father Adam and our mother Hawwa and their stay in paradise. That’s how she presented our first ancestors to me. I was about three or four years old. Anyway, it was before I started attending the Mi’lama (traditional primary school) to learn how to read and write and learn the Qur’an by heart at the age of four.

In the early days of the Mi’lama, I learnt about Iblees, not as an evil monster, but as a lively and lovable creature who tickled people out of their sombreness and turned their longdrawn faces into smiling and welcoming faces. Iblees did not figure in my mother’s stories, and when I mentioned him to her she was horrified I knew about him. She told me it was Iblees who tricked Adam and Hawwa out of Paradise. I asked her why she never mentioned Iblees in her Adam and Hawwa story, and she said there was no need to mention him because Paradise was a better place without him.

With time I learnt from my mother how our world was created from a green gem, and the source of that gem was Allah’s Throne that sustains the whole created world. I also learnt more about the creation of the world from the rawis (storytellers) who roamed around the country telling divine and miracle stories, and stories of the mythological heroes of ancient Yemen. In the rawi stories gems formed an important component of the stories. In fact, the gems made the stories unfold with their magical powers, and almost all the heroes had gems to help them fulfil their ambitions. Some of the heroes braved deadly dangers to obtain the gems needed to attain the desired goal.

The world of the creation stories and of the ancient myths of my mother and the rawis was just as real to me as the world in which I
lived. I saw no difference between the world of the narrated stories and life around me in the Yemen of the nineteen-forties. Even the emir of my hometown, who became king in 1948, was known as Ahmad Ya Jinna (of the Genii), because he possessed genie powers through which he ruled not only the human world but also the genie and animal worlds, and could perform feats like those of the heroes of the ancient myths of Yemen, feats far beyond the capability of the people of the real world. And he acquired that power from the gems he gouged out of the eyes of an enormous serpent guarding the throne of one of the ancient kings of Yemen hidden deep inside one of the mountain caves of Taiz.

In 1952 I came to England on a liner. As we reached the Bay of Biscay the sea roughened and rocked the liner. Most of the passengers were sick, including myself. I reached London, and the following morning I was on my way to Liverpool, and from there to Maghull, my new home.

I was puzzled by the Bay of Biscay experience. I couldn’t understand why the liner was roughened up by the waters of the Bay of Biscay, though it sailed calmly through the other seas. One day I mentioned my Bay of Biscay experience to a Yemeni seaman and he explained: at the bottom of the Bay of Biscay lie the eyes of the giant king of the sea, and when the giant king of the sea opens and closes his eyes, the disturbed waters roughen up into waves and move upwards to rock the passing ships.

I had forgotten this incident until I started writing The Arab Creation Myth, especially the scene of the paradisial bull Rayyaan whose breathing under the earth-enveloping waters caused the high tide and low tide:

The horns of Rayyaan rose out of the seven earths heavenwards until their fine pointed tips formed a fence under the feet of Allah’s Throne, and the nose of Rayyaan was under the sea, and when Rayyaan breathed there was high tide and low tide.

I then thought, was the Yemeni seaman aware of the Rayyaan story or did he hear similar stories when he was a boy in his village in Yemen?

In the early sixties I discovered the creation stories of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians and the people of Ugarit, and this discovery revived my interest in the creation stories I once heard from my mother and the rawis. I started looking for these stories in what survived of the